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EDITOR'S NOTE

My staff, an army.
Volkmer, providing the map.
Caffeine, a God-send.

The content is fierce,
representing students full
of passion, talent.

A tribute to them:
writers and artists here who
deserve much support.

Honored and humbled,
I hope you dig this *Lantern*.
Love, *Sarah Schwolsky*

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Cover Image

The Conqueror.....Lindsay Hogan

The real memories of travel are not the places you visit but the people who welcome you into them. I met Mohammed while spending the day at his family's nomadic camp in the Moroccan Sahara. The day consisted of many expeditions up the dunes with toy cars in hand anticipating the universal joy of sending them careening down the steep sand to an inevitable crash. It was good to be a kid again. The picture is 2.8 megapixels and was taken with a Canon EOS 10D which still has flecks of orange sand stuck in the dials.

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Lantern Prose Prize

“Il Travatore” by Quinn Gilman-Forlini

Judge’s Note:

“Il Travatore” is a wonderful story. At its most basic, it does what all good stories must do by creating a separate reality, a moment in its own time, real enough that our own sense of time and place vanishes and we find ourselves swept away.

From the beginning lines of “Il Travatore” we see a young woman, Katherine, walking into a church, hear the click of her high heels on hard pavement, and feel her desire and anticipation that something exciting is about to happen, that an experience is about to be gained. From there, the story keeps us involved through detailed descriptions of scenes and settings, by very natural and comfortable dialogue and plotting which altogether serve to create living characters and, most effectively, an evolving sense of unease. We fear that Katherine, who is on the cusp of adulthood herself, will soon learn a very cold truth.

Without giving too much away, let me say that “Il Travatore” resonates beyond its confined structure, and the story excels because it hits upon a larger truth that perception and reality are often at odds, thus connecting us all to the greater experience of what it means to be human. Good stories need to do two things: create a world we can experience with all of our senses, while also conveying an idea or meaning worth telling. Simple, yet incredibly difficult. And yet, here I am, on the opposite side of the continent, reading a story written (presumably) by an author in Pennsylvania, that is set in Manhattan, about one night in the life of a character drawn entirely from the imagination, and she, Katherine, will stay with me for a lifetime. “Il Travatore” reminds me why I still sometimes mourn my own lost idealism (yet admit that it’s not completely dead), and for that I applaud the author. “Il Travatore” is a great accomplishment.

A former merchant marine and construction worker, **David Munro** received an MFA in Creative Writing (’03, Fiction) from the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. He continues to write in the Old Pueblo, where he lives with his wife, two children, and four chickens.

Il Travatore

He was singing in a church that night. The windows were slits in the stone that seeped warmth against the night air, beckoning the drove of people to the double wooden doors. I walked behind my mother and father and pretended I didn't know them, listening to the hollowness of my shoes against the pavement, a sophisticated click. I let the autumn wind push me along in my new elegant dress; it had a cinched waist that slid with my movement. It made me feel taller and thinner and I kept glancing at myself in glass building reflections. On the train ride down I had stared at my reflection in the dark window as we'd pulled underground into Grand Central Station and decided I could pass for eighteen, maybe even twenty if I walked fast enough. I was in the city; I could be anybody. I moved like I owned the street, even though I didn't know its name. That didn't matter tonight. I was invited.

I was nervous for him. I was always nervous for him, every performance we went to. My body froze in that instant when his fingers gently tapped the air to the pianist's introduction and his chest rose with the breath that became the first note. I thought *oh please don't mess up*, and I was petrified until I heard his voice and it was beautiful, it was long sighs of warm sound that echoed and blended like a pipe organ. It was Freddy, and he was all right like he was always all right. I closed my eyes and loosened my hands.

I was foreign to churches. This one was sleepy like a soft flame, lit like the embers in a welding piece of iron. I slipped my feet out of my shoes to ease the ache, but then decided that I didn't want to reveal how unpracticed I was in the high heel world. My mother squeezed my knee as he rose to a high note, right at the pause before a clear burst of symmetry. She got nervous too, sometimes, but mostly she touched me to get connected to something real before she floated too high. If she didn't ground herself she might get caught and trapped in the dreamy notion that her son was an opera singer.

When he sang I always wondered what other people thought of him. I wanted to lean over to the couple sitting next to me and whisper, "That's my brother." He was large and lean in his James Bond tuxedo, a striking figure against the backdrop of an altar. He

filled every shadow with his melodic movement and the ease of his presence. His eyes scoped the back of the room as if the sheet music were projected on the wall. When he sang, he forgot about life, he'd told me once. He lost himself in an image of the music, his own image: a restless place that shaded the corners of practicality and left a deep, sensory hole in the center. He reached for that hole, tried to climb into it. I could hear him stretching out toward its opening and I wanted to slow my heart beat, to ride the winding echoes he became.

But tonight, I was too excited. I couldn't stop thinking about the stream of activity briskly marching by outside the stained glass sanctuary of the church. Freddy sang romantically, it must have been a love song stained with betrayal, his eyes pinching together with artful half-tears. I wanted to shriek and faint in the aisle and cause a dramatic scene.

After the show, the people paraded out crinkling their programs. Some shook or patted Freddy's hand and then stole away into the blur of lights in the city street. My mother and father embraced him tightly while trying not to seem overbearing. I waited behind them more nonchalant, leaning against a pew feeling mysteriously important. I smiled at him in such a way that the people stumbling by would know that I knew him.

"Hey, Katherine," Freddy said when it was my turn.

"Hey," I said, as casual as possible. I wondered if he noticed how dressed up I was.

"Thanks for coming."

I shrugged. "I didn't really have a choice."

He laughed. "We can always count on Katherine to lift our spirits."

I rolled my eyes and brushed my hair behind my ear.

"It's so good to see you," my mother said. "We live so close, I mean it's just a train ride away. We don't see you enough."

"I know," Freddy said. "Tell me, how was I?"

"You were spot-on tonight," my father said. "You're really improving, you know that? The way you move up there—"

"And he's so sharply dressed," my mother said. "You're so handsome. Isn't he handsome?"

"You know who you look like?" my father said. "The guy

who played Secret Agent. What's that guy's name? It's on the tip of my tongue. Ah, damn it, nevermind. You know who I'm talking about."

"I really liked Joseph," I said.

"What?" my father asked.

"Joseph. The pianist? He was really good," I said.

"How did you know his name was Joseph?" my mother asked.

"Oh, me and Joseph go way back."

"She looked at the program," Freddy said. "Joe's okay."

"How long do you think this gig is going to last?" my mother asked.

Freddy shook his head. "Not very long," he said. "Their regular guy is coming back soon. He's getting better. Came home from the hospital on Tuesday."

"That's too bad," I said.

"Has anybody seen my glasses?" my father asked.

"I have a couple of auditions for some opera companies lined up the next few weeks."

"Do they pay?" my mother asked.

"They're in your coat pocket, Dad," I said.

"Oh, thanks. So what are you up to tonight, Freddy?" my father said.

"If you kept your glasses in one place this wouldn't keep happening," my mother said.

"I was hoping we could go out," Freddy said. "To talk about the show."

"Isn't it time you two were in bed?" I asked my parents. It was half past ten. On a typical Friday night they would have already fallen asleep watching old British sitcoms.

"That's the trouble with your performances, Freddy," my mother said. "They're so late. We should come down in the day. Some Sunday afternoon, that would be nice."

"I never get to spend time with Freddy," I said. "He's my only brother. Can't I stay with him tonight?"

"By yourself?" my father asked.

"No, with Freddy," I said.

"Well, I don't know—"

"I can take the train home in the morning. I know how to do it. Freddy, don't you want to see me? You never get to see me." I smiled too wide.

"Yeah, of course," Freddy said, smooth and eager. "Me and Katie need to spend some quality time together. Don't worry about her. The night is young!" He lifted a fist in the air for dramatic effect, then slapped my back and said time was a-wasting; we had to roll.

As soon as our parents were reassured onto Track 37 north toward Cortland, we sped away from Grand Central Station and I linked arms with him in the excitement of the biting air.

"What a beautiful night. Isn't it gorgeous?" I asked.

"Stunning, *magnifico*," he played along in his acting voice like there was a full house.

"So, where are we off to? What are your usual haunts? Some place – glamorous?"

Freddy laughed. "Only the absolute best for my darling Katherine. Here, turn left here. I'm sure we'll find a place."

"Oh my gosh, you have no idea what a grind home is. And you know how Dad always repeats himself? Well, it's getting worse. It's like I'm trapped in this time warp or something. Like, this one time we ordered Thai food, right? And they gave us two Duck Basils by accident, instead of a red curry. Whatever, just eat the Duck Basil. But Dad kept saying, 'The night would have been perfect, if only that Thai restaurant hadn't messed up our order.' And then five minutes later, 'It's too bad that Thai restaurant messed up our order.' Okay, Dad, we get it!"

Freddy was laughing more. I played it up for him.

"Ugh, and don't get me started on school this year. I have the worst English teacher on the planet. She gives us stupid grammar worksheets all the time, and she doesn't have that many different ones. So one time this kid raised his hand and told her we'd already done this worksheet. And she didn't even look up from her computer, she just snapped, 'Well, do it again!'"

"Are you in high school yet?" Freddy asked.

"Almost," I whispered, embarrassed. "Shut up, will you?"

"What do you think, these people have a sonic ear?" he said.

I figured his age made up for mine. People might think we were dating. Maybe we were going to get married. I was engaged to an operatic man in a tuxedo. His sleeve was soft against my hand. "Ooh! Can we go in there?" I pointed to a dimly lit restaurant bar with smooth tables and glittering people. These were the kinds of people who used different forks to eat oysters and insisted on making reservations under "Dr. and Mrs. So and so."

"Looks a little pricey," he said. He ran his hand through his hair. It fell naturally around the angles of his face.

"Looks a little fun," I said. "We could do the stuffy act. Oh, please!"

He gave me all the presence I was hoping for, marching into the carpeted foyer with his arm draped across my shoulder, treating the hostess with a chilling superiority, asking for a table with a view. I looked out at the sidewalk where the commoners strolled by. We were divided by thin blue glass that trapped the bare candlelight of the restaurant, sharply dressed and clean and ready for a full night.

"Order me champagne," I said. "A pink one."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, c'mon. Nobody cares here."

"Yeah right, not until I can't pay the check."

But he lifted his finger for service. Freddy handled the icy, condescending stare of the waiter with a keen air of sophistication and a deeply controlling tone. I thought he was going to slip a little golden cigarette holder out of his inside pocket and strike a match against the waiter's notebook, even though I knew he didn't smoke. I wished I was wearing lipstick. I thought about how I might be able to get some without my mother knowing, for next time.

"An Americano for me," Freddy said. "And she'll have a Ginger Ale."

I blushed. "What was that for?" I spat at him when the waiter had disappeared.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, my dear," he said, maintaining his air. "You remember your great uncle Bobby? He was an alcoholic. Poor chap. Used to order Ginger Ales at the bar because it looked like a drink, so he could still hang out with his buddies."

I tried to hide my pout. When the drinks arrived I gracefully

took a sip of my soda, pretending it was too strong to drink with any swiftness. I watched the tiny bubbles spritzing open as they reached the top. "Let me have a taste," I said, pointing at his shadowed red drink swirling around in a highball glass.

"Ah, this really soothes the throat," he said, ignoring me. He looked out the window at a passing man who was eating street vendor chestnuts. "Look at that, the chestnuts are back. It's already that time of year," he said, more to himself. I nodded. I hadn't had street chestnuts since I was in first grade. They came in a little wax paper bag you peeled away to let the steam escape. "You know my old accompanist, Paula?" he went on.

"Is that the one who always drank from a flask before she went onstage?"

"Yeah, her. I went out with her last weekend, to catch up. She got *four* Long Island iced teas!"

I looked at him blankly.

"It's a really strong drink," he said. "There's like ten shots in one of those. A normal person would pass out if they drank that much. Here, let me give you some life advice. If you ever go out drinking—"

"I'm not—"

"I mean ever, in your whole life. I don't care if you're fifty-seven. Do not order a Long Island iced tea. Get anything else, I don't care. Just not that."

"Let's go to that French café we used to have lunch at with mom and dad," I said.

"Jesus, Katherine, one thing at a time. Why don't you take it easy and soak in the ambiance? It's expensive." He closed his eyes and took an exaggerated inhale, stretching back in his chair as he released the breath. He ordered another Americano. "Mm, okay, you can try it this time," he said to me. "Go ahead, it's good."

He knew how to shut me up. I took in its gasoline strength, then touched it to my lips. It burned me, scared me, I nearly passed out from its potential power.

Freddy was amused by my naiveté. "Very cute," he murmured. "Oh, man. You've got one wild ride ahead of you."

"Really?" I asked.

"I can't wait for the first time you get drunk." He signaled for the check. "Have to be careful not to get carried away," he said. He offered me the mint that came on the sleek bill.

His steps were more deliberate when we went outside. I tried to quicken his pace, to get moving. "A guy from some local ballet company is going to come in to watch our class on Tuesday," I chattered. "He might choose a couple of us to be in his next show. They need some younger girls." I waited for him to say good luck, or you've got it in the bag, but he only nodded to himself. "It would be so great if I got it," I said. "I mean, my class is okay, but they're not really serious about it, you know? Half of them get their shoes from Payless." Freddy guided me down the steps into a subway station as I talked. "So where next?" I asked.

"We're going to take the one train to my neighborhood," he said.

As we were waiting for the train, I asked, "Freddy, can you sing for me?"

He didn't even preface it, just started. I recognized the song; it was from an Italian opera called *Il Travatore*. Freddy used to play it on the stereo when he would come home for vacations during college. It meant "the troubadour." Like Freddy, I thought. He sang lighter than usual, like one might sing along to the radio when washing dishes, but his voice was still full and it made the vacant track seem sad for a moment. I grabbed his hand and shoulder and led him into a small waltz around the platform, empty except for a couple of preteen girls sitting on a bench with their mouths open like fish. Be jealous, I thought. *Di geloso amor sprezzato...* I wished we had a bigger audience. He twirled me as two old men eased onto the platform and I nearly smacked right into them. We were holding our sides with suppressed laughter.

"I have to go to the bathroom. Where do you usually go?" I asked when we pulled ourselves up the stairs at the other end of the train ride. He cocked an eyebrow. There were flashing ATM, open, and hot pizza signs, bright and awake, all around us. They pulled us tighter into our sidewalk world.

"Here," he said, gesturing to a red and gold colored plush hotel. "In the lobby." He pushed open the glass doors and leaned

next to my ear. "Remember, we belong," he breathed. Then his face became older, richer, and cast with melodramatic first-world problems. We strode past the concierge desk with a subtle smile and nod, up the carpeted grand staircase into a mezzanine balcony area with thick, patterned chairs. "Oh yes, darling," he said in a British accent as we passed a party of elite and elderly on their way out. "We really *must* get to Paris this year. What a pity your old Aunt Maeve had to have her funeral just before our spring trip. Damn inconvenience."

He ushered me into a long corridor that led to a brass plated bathroom with couches and initial-engraved napkins to dry your hands. When I came out he was sitting cross-legged on a poof of an ottoman, checking phone messages. "Next time, *do* remember your mink, my love," Freddy said as we passed the flittering concierge on the way out.

We walked down the aisles of a liquor store a few blocks down, in a quieter part of town. Freddy stared at dusty labels. I looked at the pictures on the bottles and told him which ones I liked best but he said that he was concentrating. I wandered over to the girl at the checkout. She and Freddy had exchanged hellos when we walked in. She wore dark eyeliner that made her look like a raccoon.

"You know him?" she asked me as I examined those little chocolate liqueur bottles wrapped in boldly colored foils. I nodded, glad she wasn't sure how. "Sister?" she guessed. I nodded again. She leaned over at me across the counter, lowering her voice. "So tell me, what is Freddy *really* like?"

I wanted to say something witty and intimate without being too personal. I wanted to prove our relationship, to show how close we were. But the only thing that came to mind was when we watched *Duck Soup* for two weeks straight and memorized the entire movie. That was before he started calling musical theatre entertainment for the commoners.

"He steals silverware from restaurants," I said instead. It was kind of true. He had taken a soup spoon he'd liked once, years ago. Our parents had been furious, and he'd justified it by saying the spoon had a good feel in his hand.

"Oh, that is *so* Freddy!" the girl said. "I will never let him live this down!"

"I've wanted to try my hand at mint juleps," Freddy said, coming over with a bottle of bourbon. I leaned against the door as he paid and briefly talked to the girl about how tonight's show had gone. I could tell he was bored with her and her raccoon eyes.

His building was right down the street, four stories and elevator-less. I carried the plastic bag of forbidden liquid up the stairs while he rummaged in all of his pockets, searching for his keys. I hadn't ever been to this apartment. It was small, but warm. It smelled like macaroni.

Freddy made himself a mint julep and he poured me a glass of seltzer with a splash of red wine. He called it a cherry soda. I strode around his closet-size living room twirling my glass of tinted seltzer. He sipped his drink and then he stood. His eyes were half vacant. I looked at him, but he didn't seem to notice. I refilled my glass with more wine, all wine, it was a deep, rich red and I knew I might feel anything, I might leave myself. He started out slow, like tuning into a radio station. *Che gelida manina, se la lasci riscaldar*, he sang. The space was so small it vibrated within him, echoing in my ears and bouncing out at the same time. I felt trapped in his sound, completely swallowed. *In povertà mia lieta, scialo da gran signore, rime ed inni d'amore*. I thought he was going to choke on his own power, to collapse from his red face and heaving body. *Per sogni e per chimere, e per castelli in aria, l'anima ho milionaria*. The song was picking up its pace, it was getting bigger, more whole, and yet it slid so easily into me. I was dancing and drinking and being very grown up. I spun until I landed sprawled on his rug. I traced my finger around the cool rim of my empty glass. He crawled into the ending, letting the last note hang in the stillness of the room until it wisped away. A detached moment dragged by before he came back to the here and now. He poured more bourbon.

"Can you teach me how to sing?" I asked.

"You have a good voice," he said.

I closed my eyes. My chorus teacher in school said that sometimes. But I knew it wasn't true whenever I heard Freddy. "Not really," I said.

"You'll get better when you're older," he said.

"But you've always been good. I mean, when you were my age you were good."

"To you, maybe."

I stretched out like a starfish on the rug. "I don't want to go back," I said. He didn't answer. I stared at the ceiling for what seemed like a while. My mind was drifting away. I tried to catch it and I felt a rush, a light and airy excitement trembling beneath me. I sprang up. "So what are we doing next?"

"I'm going to bed," he said.

"You know what we should do? We should go out for a nightcap, like in the old movies."

"It's late, Katherine."

"Can't we at least sing a little more?" I asked.

"I have work in the morning, then a performance at night. I need to sleep." His voice had dropped into a gravelly grumble.

"Work? Isn't your show work?"

He scoffed. "Are you kidding? I'm lucky to get that spot, even as a substitute. That's not my *job*. I do it for free."

I squinted at him. He made a funny face like we were playing some kind of game. "You sing and they don't even pay you for it?"

"Katherine, it's like a promotion. I'm trying to make my name."

"Then what do you *do*?" I asked in a small voice.

"I work at the Shop Rite."

I stared. I didn't blink. "What?"

He furrowed his brow. "You didn't know that?"

"No."

"What did you think I did all day?"

"I thought you were an opera singer." It was very simple. He wore a tuxedo.

"Well, now you know what an opera singer does," he said.

"Never quits his day job. Jesus Christ, Katherine, what the hell do you think I'm trying to do? You think I *want* to ring up groceries? That's the way it is. That's art for you. It costs a lot. Hell, so do you. I can't believe I spent that much at that stupid bar. This is the goddamn thanks I get." He lumbered out of the room, leaving his thick empty glass on a rickety table.

I sat down slowly and looked at the floor, my eyes unfocused. There was a stain on the rug where I had been lying. I listened to him

rummaging in the bathroom cabinets, splashing cold water on his face. He came out with his hair rubbed so it stood up like a rooster. He was wearing a Fordham t-shirt and boxers. He needed to shave.

"I'm sorry, Katie. I'm just tired. Do you want some blankets or something?" he said.

"What are you?" I asked.

"What?"

"Nevermind."

In the morning I stretched against the floor, sinking into the cold sheets that had been strewn across me. He hadn't even offered me his bed. I ached against the thin carpet. The bald light was stale and little dust particles moved through the room like they had leaked in from the window, suspended in an expanding galaxy. I forced myself up, dry and dull. I went over to Freddy's cubicle kitchen and opened the fridge. There was an orange, a half-eaten Entenmann's coconut cream cake, and four bottles of beer. I took out the cake and opened some cabinets to look for plates. He had some plastic silverware and napkins stashed between a bottle of Campari and a bottle of Vermouth. I felt silly eating the cake. It made me nauseous. I went over to the closet, where he had hung up my dress. When I put it on over my slip I felt like a hanger limply holding, not shaping. Freddy's tuxedo was there in a plastic bag, haphazardly placed between a jacket and an apple red polo shirt. The shirt had small yellow words stitched in the corner: Shop Rite. A name tag was loosely pinned beneath this: *Fred*. His own tag. Claiming him.

I left his apartment as quietly as I could, taking three dollars out of his wallet on the way for a subway ticket back to Grand Central. The streets were launching into morning coffee and running watches. I walked by the business people like squashed leftovers, passing groceries and drug stores, noting each cashier contained in his Plexiglas window, face blank, bound and tagged.

Lantern Poetry Prize

“Frangipani” by Arielle Ross

Judge’s Note:

“Frangipani” is a linguistically rich and thematically complex poem that offers the reader a keen awareness of life and death as they live side-by-side; the fragility, beauty and brutality of the natural world is slowly, yet startlingly revealed.

“Frangipani” is sonically pleasurable to read, filled with wonderful music, as well as strong visual images. The poem draws the reader into its country through all the senses, then haunts the reader with a tsunami that sucks us down into an abyss of absence of color, light and smell. The poem has an incantatory repetition of the word frangipani; yet each time the word frangipani is used, it represents a different human concern: a love song to dawn, awakening into sensual pleasure, spirituality, death, future generations of life, and what will be passed on to the future generations.

I have faith that the poet has captured an important life experience and continues to allow the experience to offer new insight. I believe this because each time I read the poem I discover something new to look at, to hear, or smell or feel – on the outside or on the inside. The poem ends with a strong, clear, omniscient voice. I believe the writer knows the future, as it is written in the poem, because of how well the past of the poem has been created by the poet.

Doris Ferleger, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, and award-winning poet and essayist whose work won the *New Letters* Poetry Prize, and the *A Room of Her Own* (AROH) prize for creative non-fiction among others. Her poems and essays have appeared in numerous journals including: *Comstock Review*, *L.A. Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review* and *Poet Lore*, and in anthologies entitled: *Mother Poet* and *Journey into Motherhood*. Her debut book of poetry entitled *Big Silences in a Year of Rain* was a finalist for the Alice James Beatrice Hawley award and her capbook of elegies for her late husband is entitled *When You Become Snow*. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Vermont College and was named poet laureate of Montgomery County PA in 2009.

Frangipani

I.

A frangipani tree wafts creamy
Indian yellow offerings
through my open window, calling out aubades in
childhood Swahili
urging Adrienne and me with heady scent-offerings to
unfurl from our white cocoon.

On a warm southern island,
a Dutch tourist braids frangipani
blossoms into her blonde hair.
She sprawls on the beach,
and Buddhist monks avoid
her burned red body as
they convey offerings of lotus
garlands to the temple.

Frangipani blossoms
and lemongrass
mango rice and lotus garlands
adorn spirit houses.
In a bougainvillea pink restaurant
Buddha in fuchsia velvet meditates.

II.

Nightmares of floods,
livid foam and drift wood splintering
murderously through the deluge—
a wall covered in faces startles me
awake.

I do not know why.

My nanny avoids my room
for white is the color of death,
the absence of light,
the absence of color,
the absence of smell.

We wake up this morning
to smells of frangipani—a Bengali funeral flower
relaying news of tsunami:
insistent waves that vanish villages
swallow fishing boats
sweep away children too small to avoid being
pulled
under.

Today, everyone will
wear white and carry to the spirit houses
frangipani garlands and offerings of rice cakes.

Today, papers cover a wall
with names
and numbers
and faces.

Today, our phone will ring at two in the morning,
at three in the afternoon,
at eight, at ten thirty.

To those born later, today will always be white.

Creager Award

Alfred L. Creager, '33, Prize. An endowed prize for excellence in creative writing, to be awarded annually to the student who contributes the best work, either fiction, poetry or nonfiction, to a campus publication. This award honors Rev. Dr. Alfred L. Creager, who was an Ursinus graduate of the Class of 1933 and earned his Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Ursinus in 1955. He was a professor of religion at Ursinus for 28 years and served as the college chaplain for 25 years.

“Ghost Story” by Amanda Blythe

Judge’s Note:

I confess a personal affinity for “Ghost Story.” Much like the protagonist, I also spent countless hours of my adolescence hunting my hometown for the haunted, the cursed, the downright *weird*. But that’s not why it won the Creager.

“Ghost Story” documents with cartographic precision the not-at-all straightforward relationship between a storyteller and her audience, how the two orbit each other like tidally-locked planets, each demanding the impossible of the other. That alone sets “Ghost Story” apart from its peers, but what makes it a Creager Prize-winner is its understanding of the relationship between a storyteller and her story. Every story is an unquiet spirit, simultaneously transcending time and hopelessly bound by it. In a different universe, Alan and Lisle have their own past, present and future; but we will only ever know them in this context, in this moment, the way they were when they drove to a burned-out house one clear summer day.

“Ghost Story” wins this year’s Creager Prize for its beautifully-constructed reminder that to write a story is to conjure a ghost.

Dan Sergeant is a 2008 Ursinus graduate who had the rare honor of being Editor-in-Chief of *The Lantern* for its 75th anniversary publication. He is currently the Prose Editor for Interrobang?! Magazine, a bi-annual literary magazine celebrating the arts in all their independent glory. In what he will one day recall as his “Bohemian years,” he lives, loves, and authors ‘zines in Providence, Rhode Island, where he shares an apartment with his girlfriend, two roommates, and three cats.

Ghost Story

Did Alan ever tell you the one about the bones? Leah told you to come talk to me, right? I'm never any good at these sorts of things. I guess the closest we ever got to a real "encounter" was that time, at that little shack, over in Lancaster County. Really, you should go talk to Alan; he's the expert after all. I just go in the houses. He used to tell me that he was afraid of them, the haunted houses. I always thought he was such a baby. Practically a legal adult and still chasing after ghosts, and yet hiding out in the car while my sister and I actually went in. The way he looked at them though, the houses, like if he could just bear to get a little closer, like they were dragons guarding a precious hoard. I always asked him, hoping maybe he'd change his mind. He never did go in one.

They didn't really scare me at all, honestly. Their emptiness never bothered me like it did other people. Leah, of course, used to freak the hell out. She'd get all jumpy and skittish, and it was like she could hear things I couldn't. A rustle of rotting curtain spun out a whole story in her head while I missed it almost every time. Alan used to get so frustrated with me. "If Leah could hear it, why couldn't you?" They'd been ganging up on me since grade school, though, nothing new.

That August was one of the hotter ones in recent memory. Alan and I had been lying around on the porch most days, waiting for Leah to get home from camp. She had been in this summer program for aspiring biologists at my mother's insistence, and had been spending her days traipsing around in the forests at the edges of town. She used to bring home all sorts of cool stuff - once they found this fragile little bird skeleton, completely intact and could have been made of paper for all it weighed. Leah and I strung it up to our ceiling with clear plastic wire. The little bones had been smoothed away by the weather until they were almost soft, so dry and smooth, so light. Alan hadn't really cared (because it wasn't about ghosts) but he had cocked his head thoughtfully once it was up, throwing its shadow across the wall. I think he approved aesthetically even it didn't directly relate to his obsession.

But without Leah there to entertain us with tales of the

outside world, Alan and I wasted away, throwing things for the dogs to catch, reading old mystery novels out in the sun until we felt like we were going to either melt or burn up without the shade. Then one day, out of the blue, he declared, "We're driving to the next house today. Pack up the car." He had been scouting out this new place, out in the middle of nowhere, abandoned in the heart of this old religious community. Mostly the houses we went to were pretty close by, but for some reason Alan had been all over this one, practically salivating at the thought of it. "You're going to like this one, I just know it," he kept saying to me, although God forbid he give me a straight answer or anything. I didn't mind so much. I was bored out of my skull and the sticky heat coming off the Hudson was practically drowning us where we stood. It only took the thought of another day of listening to my mother trying to subtly bribe me into doing Leah's chores for her, and I was in the car.

We had to take all back-roads – a long, four-hour stretch of dirt paths and gravel drives, criss-crossing and webbing through corn fields like capillaries. My car didn't have air-conditioning which wasn't so bad with the windows rolled down but it was noisy as anything, the drone of wind in my ears nearly drowning Alan out. Not that he cared if I was actually listening. You know him: the guy can talk about anything and nothing for hours and be perfectly happy whether you got a word in edgewise or not. Usually he'd run out of opinions sooner or later. But for the once, he was geeking out about something that other people, incredibly, also cared about. Meaning that there was a lot of pseudo-science out there to research and subsequently lecture back to me, his long-suffering captive audience. If I never hear the word ectoplasm again in my life, I could die a happy woman. All the way from Albany to the Nowhere Farmland Paradise, PA, I heard the fledgling treatise of Alan Beadle spoken free-verse. I could name every hotel suicide and old-maid psycho-killer in the tri-state area. I knew the ins and outs of "diaphanous light spectrums" and "electro-magnetic perception." I knew what to look for, what to listen for, when to run and when to speak. I could have given the Ghostbusters a run for their fucking money.

Around midday, we approached the house and Alan finally wound down a little – one could only hope that he had run out of

things to say in view of the equally long return trip looming on the rear end of ghost hunt number nine. We had passed a really small town a while back but that was apparently the only sign of civilization for miles. The rest was farmland and some scattered woods. The heat here was more intense but dry, like being in an oven rather than a sauna. I cut the transmission and the sudden hush of isolation rushed in on us as we gave the house a good once-over. We clambered out, car doors and the crunch of stones under our feet seemed overly loud amongst the quiet sounds of distant birdcall.

The gap in conversation spread. I could tell Alan was waiting for me to break it. "You don't talk enough," he always used to tell me on the rare occasions when Leah wasn't there to buffet us against each other. It's not that we were unfriendly. The three of us have been friends since childhood, and we knew the drill - I was the quiet twin, and Leah was the place to go for the witty repartee. Alan always enjoyed pushing his luck though, like it was his personal duty to me to "draw me out of my shell." I hate when people try to "draw me out of my shell." I don't have a "shell" and if I did, I wouldn't want drawing out of it, thanks. But that's Alan for you, doesn't know when to leave well enough alone. So when it was just us, he always drawing attention to the gaping hole between us where Leah should have been, like it affronted his sensibilities that I couldn't figure out her shtick. I was not my sister, as everyone was in such a hurry to tell me, and Alan didn't suffer mediocrity gladly.

"Are you going in this time?" I asked. He made no outward sign of having heard me and for a minute I thought maybe he wouldn't even answer. He stumbled on for a few steps on the unkempt lawn, long legs bunching up high and cutting back down to get through the brittle grass.

"If I was, I wouldn't need you here would I? I don't keep you around for thrilling commentary." I think he meant these sorts of things as a joke. I tried to see them as such. Most of the time, I did okay. I threw him a wan smile - a sort of apology. He nudged my shoulder companionably towards the house.

"So this is the house of Brenda Shellman and her two sons. They were Quakers, apparently, very devout. For some reason, the rest of the group left. From what I've been able to dig up, there was

some sort of feud between the community and the state government over land rights. But even after they left she stayed behind. I think there was something not quite kosher about her marriage, but they never mention him in any documents and you know how people in these small communities are when they're facing something socially embarrassing. They just clam up. No end of frustration to historians, never a straight answer about anything."

"You're hardly a historian."

"Did I say it frustrated me? When did I count myself as one of the frustrated?"

"Well, aren't you?"

No answer, just a smirk as he shielded his eyes from the sun, squinting at the house.

"Well, it's certainly no Happy Daes, that's for sure," I said, a weak attempt at humor. A peace offering.

"Are you still hung up over the candy bar thing?" Offering: ill-received. Alan's previous obsession had been discontinued candy bars from the turn of the century. I should've known better than to be that passé. "I thought we had exhausted that avenue months ago."

"I'm just saying if I had a choice between dead people and candy....Can't really blame me, can you?"

"And Happy Daes of all things," he muttered, ignoring me entirely. "Ridiculous, a candy bar designed to taste like a sundae, just stupid. I should think it would be clear that half the reason sundaes are so widely—"

"Yeah, yeah, okay, what was that about dead people again?"

Before discontinued candy bars of the turn of the century, it was a stationery collection – single sheets with mysterious monograms, old hand-written letters, typewritten perfume-scented love notes, thick creamy beige parchment, never used, day-glo eye-sores for children, anything he could get his hands on in paper stores or antique shops or unclaimed return-to-senders from the post office, just so he could press them up against each other in a mish-mash of textures and prints and colors, fan them out, shuffle them around with wide palms like tarot cards. Before stationery, he learned the properties of medicinal herbs from primitive cultures the world over, and how to prepare them. I don't know. It wasn't like he was a savant

or anything, but he just couldn't manage to focus on more than one thing at a time. And the stupid, obscure shit he did focus on got beat into the ground. There had always been an obsession, a focal point around which all our playdates and nights out revolved. We didn't really know why, and by the time we were old enough to realize other children were different from our friend, we couldn't really justify making him own up to it.

"Testing handheld 1, test test," said Alan, voice in stereo, crackling on my walkie-talkie. I unclipped it from my belt to reply in kind.

"Remember, tell me everything," he insisted.

"Yeah, yeah, I know—"

"Because I know you aren't as comfortable with details like Leah—"

"No, I get it! You've told me a thousand times."

"No! It's fine, I get it." It would just be so much better if he didn't look at me like that, like I was stationery. "You don't have to be the same." Like I was a ghost. I gave him my best glare. If Alan had been any less assured of himself, I would've almost said he looked chastised.

I caved. "Yeah, I know. Detail, right, all the detail."

"Right."

Another cheeky grin, and he turned in a neat about-face, signaling my dismissal. I turned to the house. I always felt bad about this part, where I just left him on the street. I knew that in the time it took me to walk through the overgrown yard up to the house, he would get the collapsible lawn chair from the trunk and set up in the shadow of the huge pines along the road.

"You really should just come in," I told him on the two-way.

"And deprive you of your adventure? I'm not that selfish."

I laughed at him openly, "Whatever you say." He gave a quiet huff of answering laughter over the radio.

The house itself wasn't very Quaker at all. You'd expect for them all to be living in little wooden cottages with a well-pump out front and cows wandering around in the back. But this little excuse for a shack was downright suburban. The aluminum siding that remained was in a steel blue color, matte, so that it glowed like the

paper of a new book in sunlight. The house had obviously been caught in a fire. Behind the house I could see the tops of the trees that had burnt away, ends crisped and dry, raking at the sky. The dead bits looked anachronistic next to the lush greenery of the rest of the wood. The grass was sprouting up like a wheat field without any visitors to beat it into submission every day. There was the main building, two stories, four windows, and a shed off to the side with a roof tacky with half-melted tar shingles. Most of the glass had been knocked out of the windows, either in the initial fight to save the house or later from stupid teenagers looking for free shit. Or, you know, ghosts.

"They died in the fire?"

"Well, that's why it's so interesting," Alan's voice emerged in that peculiar snarl of cheap walkie-talkies. "It appears there was no one home at the time of the actual fire. No bodies were found on the premises and for the remains to have gone up quick enough to erase the evidence, they would've had to have walked right into the flames with a gas can." I approached the front door and found it off its hinges. Pried it open from the other side, slowly, working at the rusted hinges with my fingernails. "At first the police suspected accidental arson and then when they couldn't find the owners, they suspected premeditated arson. But they never found the mother or the two children."

"Well, that hardly means anything. It can't have been that hard to skip town, find another house out in the middle of nowhere. Some other state."

"Yeah, that's what the police thought too. But records state that the Shellmans had been seen driving back towards their home from town just a couple hours before the fire. They found the car right behind the shed."

I looked. "Oh yeah, it's still there." When Alan didn't go on, I realized: "Oh! Uh, it's green. Or it was. Pretty old. Ha, obviously. A lot of the parts have been stolen. It doesn't seem like it was burned in the fire though."

"Yeah, the shed didn't take too much of a beating. Okay, but guess the best part. This is what makes this one really good."

"Just tell me?" I had finally opened the door enough to get in,

hooked my right leg into the landing. I winched myself inside with a hand on each side of the door jamb.

"There were no tracks leading away from the house."

The air in the sitting room was musty, motes of dust swimming up from where my feet disturbed them, catching amber in the sun. The crackle of the radio was closer inside, more cutting, more carrying. "The car pulled up to the house but never pulled out again. The bikes in the shed were still locked up. And there were no footprints leading away from the house, either into the woods or onto the road back towards town."

"It couldn't have been easy to tell footprints apart after all the fire crews had been all over everything."

"Ha, that's what I thought too. But the police got there first and when they determined there was no one in the house, they searched the surrounding area. Nothing."

"There's a sofa, pretty ugly." It was brown paisley, very 70s, bulbous. "There's a TV set, with those V antenna, on a cart. Lamp in the corner, pink." Lampshade askew. "Three windows." Two looking over the side of the house into the woods, one out onto the front lawn. I could see Alan lounging far away, down the track my feet have made, the dry grass bent into a path. "There's, ah, there's a lot of toys. Just lying around. Trains and Hot Wheels and stuff." A teddy bear, fur worn around its tubby middle.

This was the part where Leah really excelled. A great storyteller, knew just what to include, what was important. Saying it all now, like this, after the fact, I guess I saw a lot more than I said. I swear if Alan could've just had a psychic link to my brain or something it would've been so much easier. It's like the effort of saying what I saw aloud cut me off from really noticing everything I was seeing. Maybe I even saw more than Leah would have, with her histrionics. It's just so strange to say aloud everything that's right in front of you, like talking about someone while they're still in the room. But what good was it, those details, rattling around in my head?

I usually hate that – breaking us up into two sides of same coin and all that. The eyes and the mouth, the video and the commentary. We're twins, not space aliens. It's not some mystical

bond or anything. Sure, I guess we were a lot nicer to each other than Alan was to his sister, but whatever; she was a lot older than him (and a bitch). When Leah and I were kids, we were the only ones we had around to play with so yeah, duh, we get along.

I guess it's a little silly, but it was one of my greatest fears when I was little. There are all sorts of stories about creepy twins who are practically the same person. But to my mind, that makes it seem like it was a mistake. Like you were supposed to be one whole person and instead got two imperfect versions, each as useless as the other. Like when the second body started budding off the egg, precious resources were rerouted, wasted. Like we would've been a better person as one person. Which, inevitably, only leaves one question. Which one?

"Everything looks perfectly intact, honestly," I said.

"Yeah, the fire was just at the back of the house. It had been a really wet spring that year. Even though it took the fire squad a while to arrive, the fire didn't spread very far. Honestly, they were pretty surprised a fire could start at all in those conditions."

"Was there lightning or something?"

We went through the house in that way, exploring and questioning. The kitchen was all in peach and white linoleum, heavy cast-iron pans hanging from a metal grate in the ceiling, black and ominous over the cheery pink of the sunlit room. Someone had stolen the fridge but there were pictures all over the floor from where they had fallen off. A lot of crayon drawings, mostly stick figures, one small between a tall one with yellow hair and the other even taller, drawn in brown. There was a photograph of a young blonde woman, heavily pregnant, shot from below. She was laughing at the photographer whose sticky fingers had crept in on the sides of the frame. A quick peep into the basement found it small and waterlogged from recent rains. Alan always wanted the basements to be much creepier than they ever were.

"I'll say it again, Alan, that's the exact reason why they're not. If you were in danger or afraid or something, you wouldn't go to your basement to die. Because they're nasty. There are never going to be any basement ghosts."

"If I ever get brutally murdered, I'm going to haunt your

basement just to piss you off.”

“Yeah, well, have fun with that.”

I carefully traversed the stairs to the second floor. You always had to be careful with stairs, stay along the edge with the wall, step into the deepest corner with the most support, be prepared to grab for the railing. Leah had gone through the stairs in one of the other houses. A little stone cottage where the stairs had rotted away with damp. The little old woman who’d lived there was said to rattle the windows in the upstairs bathroom after she drowned in the bathtub. But the stairs held up fine. Really, the house was unusually intact considering how long it had been abandoned.

It was only when I got to the second floor landing that I even really saw signs of the fire at all, soot licking across the ceiling and retreating around the corner. The children’s rooms were at the top of the stairs, one after the other. The first was blue with seagulls and lighthouses painted on the walls. There was a little bit of smoke damage and heaps of dust but mostly, it looked like any kid’s room. Toys everywhere, bed unmade, clothes in the hamper. The second bedroom, a baby’s room, was more disheveled. The crib had tipped over, scattering the pieces of the wooden mobile across the floor. Here there was fine layer of black soot over everything. It still smelled slightly of baby powder under the feathery smell of old dust and charcoal.

I turned the corner into the master bedroom in the back of the house where the fire had started. I was startled to find the ceiling gone, burned away completely. There was almost nothing left in the room. The bed frame and some of the remains of the spring mattress stood under the afternoon sun, charred and black, all the bedding and padding burned away to reveal the wire skeleton. The floor was thickly reinforced wood and had stood up to the fire well enough. I could see the edges of window frames in what was left of the wall behind the bed, bracketing the bed. The curtains had probably caught fire and from there, it had traveled up to the ceiling and straight through ‘til daylight. The sunshine was pouring in at that time of day, casting the frame’s spindly shadows onto the floor. Through the blackened edges of the roof, the sky looked impossibly blue and still. Not a cloud in the sky. The only other furniture in the

room was a huge bureau across from the bed.

"Must be really thick wood. Good polish? In a house this old, it may have been some sort of family heirloom."

"I guess. I'm going to try and get it open."

"Careful."

It didn't budge. The thing was huge, towering over me.

There was a small keyhole in the front, below the husked knobs of burnt-away handles. "It might be locked." I reached up on top of the bureau with my fingertips, crouched to look under it. As I walked around to peer at the back, "There doesn't seem to be a key in any of the obvious places. Even if I fou—hey wait..."

"What is it?" I could almost hear Alan snapping to attention outside on the lawn, leaning forward in his creaky plastic chair, radio cradled in both hands.

"There's a hole back here. Behind the bureau, in the wall, I think there's a hole." Even in the bright sunlight of the rest of the room it was hard to tell – I couldn't see without blocking my light and the bureau was almost right up against the wall. I slipped a hand into the space. There wasn't much room to maneuver but with my hand flat, I reached further in, downy cobwebs, ages old, breaking up under my hand. I dove in nearly to my shoulder, my whole arm between the wall and the bureau, my face resting on cool wood, looking out over the charred bed frame into the sky. I groped blindly for the edges of the opening.

Alan gave a big heaving sigh over the radio, blowing out static. "Well, I guess that's the last room. Do you want to call it a day?"

I couldn't find the hole. I pulled back slightly to get my bearings, found my hand a little low. I repositioned and plunged back in, fingers sweeping searchingly over the wallpaper, even here gritty with caked soot and dust.

"Hey, you there?"

Finally I found it, the plaster raised slightly at the edge, the opening about the size of a large fist. I could just reach my fingers inside with my palm flat to the wall. I bit my lip as I scrambled blindly. I had been hoping to find a key, thin, cool metal, or at worst bugs. When my clumsy fingers did make contact with something

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the unexpected sensation but it wasn't a bug or a key. It didn't really feel like anything specific. The object was very light, moved easily under my fingertips, smooth. Dry. The slightest curving and thickening at the end. A confused vision of shadows across a floor.

A rending crunch ripped from across the room, the screaming of twisted metal, an ominous shudder through the floor.

"Jesus Christ! What was that?!"

I must have made a pretty girly sound. I yanked my hand out of the wall and staggered slightly for the door. I glanced wildly to the bed as I grasped behind me for the doorknob. One of the beams on the edges of ceiling had fallen away, landing heavily onto the wiry bed frame, breaking though its weakened links to the floor.

"Lisle! Lisle, are you there? Godammit, answer!"

"H-hi! Sorry, hi!"

A thick rush of air over the line, "Jesus, Lisle, what was that? I heard it from here."

"A beam in the ceiling fell off."

"Are you okay? I heard you scream, did you get hurt?" His voice was high and clipped.

"No, no, it just...startled me is all. Alan, there's something back there."

"What?"

"In the wall, I felt it just when the beam fell."

"Oh..."

"I know that texture from somewhere. I only felt it for a moment." I rubbed my fingers together, brow furrowed. It had been...not familiar but... "Here let me try aga—"

"No, hey, just come back. I think we should get going."

"What? Why, come on, I almost had it!"

"It's time to leave. I think we got what we came for."

As Alan's remark dawned on me, I snapped my focus back to the bed, silent and still once more. At the time I hadn't really made any connections yet. As I said, I hadn't felt the thing in the wall for more than a moment, it could have been anything. Alan seemed to think I had ferreted out a ghost, that the falling beam was supernatural territoriality and not just shoddy craftsmanship. I'm still

not sure what I think. By the time I got back to my room in the late evening, the sun just setting, lying in bed listening to Leah babble about plant life, I looked up and saw...well, the comparison's pretty gruesome. The implications even more so. I'm not sure I like that theory.

But thinking back on those last moments in the bedroom, with my heart still pounding adrenaline, thrumming loudly in my ears, my arm coated in dust, a phantom touch between my fingers, I could almost imagine what the view must have been like through the bedroom window. With the thick curtains drawn aside for once, the view from the middle of a king-size bed. The sky an unbroken, unrelenting blue, arcing over trees and farms. The fields stretching out to the distant wooded mountains, vast and empty. As simple and as barren as a child's crayon drawing.

I left the house quickly, my head down, my breathing shallow. Alan hustled me into the car and pointed me off in the direction of civilization. We were quiet for a good long while.

"Why don't you ever go in?" I asked him later in the drive, after a pit stop and several hundred miles. We were back on the highway, zipping along towards home, take away burgers greasing up our hands, sodas sweating between our knees. Alan kept his eyes steadily on the road but his head stilled from bobbing along to the radio to show he'd heard. He squinted up to the sky, green eyes blazing and narrowed.

"I think they can probably feel it when someone's looking for them."

"Whose theory is that?"

"Oh no one, just me. Just an idea I have. Whenever you hear about ghost encounters, it's always accidental. Ghost hunters almost never find the haunted houses, it's random people. The people already living there or the people who visit like in an inn. Or the vandals. But the people who find ghosts are always there wanting something else."

I felt better with my hands warm on the steering wheel, and some thick syrupy cola in my belly. I always bounced back pretty quickly after ghost hunting, but Alan's somber mood had yet to dissipate. He drummed his fingers idly against my knee as he thought.

The gesture was unexpected but had me fighting a smile as I watched the road.

"Imagine being bound to a space, a place in a world where you no longer qualify. Being trapped there. Unable to let go. Ghosts aren't really looking for us either. There looking for something else too. We only run into each other by accident."

He gave a rueful laugh. "I want it too much. And they can feel it and know that it won't be the thing that helps them get out. Or whatever." It was odd to hear him so inarticulate. I tapped his fingers on my knee lightly on my way to another French fry. He grinned, fought me for the fry with a little laugh. "That's what I think anyway. That's why I like going with you so much."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Leah gets into it, the creepiness of it, the adrenaline." He leaned back in his seat, hitching a foot onto the dash. He shot me a level gaze over his knee. "You let things come to you. You don't go in and start building stories on top of what's already there. You slip in beside them. You become part of the place, I think. It makes you easier to run into, for them."

What's more important, more essential: the video or the commentary? The brushstrokes or the canvas?

The sun was finally setting. Those were some of the longest days of the year. It wouldn't be long before the solstice came and the days shortened again. Leah was getting out of camp, in a week, tan and fingers calloused.

Alan finally shifted his gaze from me to the passing scenery. "I wonder what happened to them." I trailed my grease-printed fingers out the open window, drifting them over currents of air like waves.

I think she got tired of being blank. Of reflecting nothing but herself for years and years and years. Alone in the woods. There still.

Why I Hate *The Lantern*

I'm sitting in the campus wellness center right now, waiting for the nurse to check my weekly allergy shots. And every week those fucking *Lanterns* sit on the table top whispering to me in frilly voices: "Pick us up and read us. We contain the works of art of your friends and enemies. Indulge in our imagery. Touch our seductively smooth covers."

"No!" I telekinetically reply. "I always get angry when I read you. Because I just can't break the pages: I long to join the club of elite artists whose works have been printed in the little book with a smooth cover. I can picture their club meetings. They drink from wine glasses and laugh at the declined submissions. 'What poor character development,' they say. 'My flatulence has more imagery than this sap's poem.' Honestly, I don't know how they do it: come up with spine-melting metaphors and similes. I think the members of the acceptance club have an extra section of the brain, a little lobe off to the side that gifts them the ability to produce their beautiful prose. Either that or they cut up a bunch of verbs, adjectives, and nouns and mix them all together in a hat, then pick from the hat. For example, they might draw the words 'puncture' and 'octopus.' 'Ah yes,' they say. 'My character's emotions can be compared to a punctured octopus.' And then it's lyrical genius! Well, no matter how they do it, I just can't."

I look at the literary magazines. They stare back. I check the clock: twenty more minutes of waiting. I reach for the nearest *Lantern*, stop, withdraw my hand. Fake-out. Instead I overturn my Spanish study guide and scribe my frustrations and addiction to the little book that talks to me in the wellness center.

A Shadow

I.

I watched as you cupped embers in your hands
And dared them turn to ash.
In this moment you tread barefoot,
Floated away to dawn in the most incurable way;
None could salvage you.
No embrace held together the stones
In that fire you burned that burned me,
And this tired melody like the whisper
Of a dying cigarette you would not become.

The wind began to fight
And pulled you away –
Wisps of hair floating away like
Ashes.
Too terrified to say good bye,
I reached out to you –
but when my fingers grazed your skin
you crumbled,
because even smoke carries a shadow.

II.

I tried so hard not to not save you
but it's been too long since you figured you out
and that the wisps trailing off your fingernails
are just currents of smoke from your last cigarette
that you try so well to hide behind.

Dear Anne, In This Place, Stringbean Girls

*Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.*

...

*But before they enter
I will have said,
Your bones are lovely,
and before their strange hands
there was always this hand that formed.*

— Anne Sexton, “Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman”

Dear Anne, in this place, stringbean girls
are too little to eat.
Pods peeled empty at wrists,
spines like knobby beans
climbing a broken ribcage trellis
wind round a dry bulb of a heart pounding thirsty until
green skin pulled tight snaps open but yields
no fruit.

Dear Anne, in this place, stringbean girls
do not grow this way.
They are not gardens ripening.
They are not orchards blooming.
They are not seeds planted.
They are rootless,
buds crushed beneath the weight
of some black thumb.

Dear Anne, in this place, stringbean girls
could fill acres forever
but die relentlessly,
halve themselves and disappear

Rosie Clark

spoiling before any gardener's spade can spoil
their narrow green crescents bent
over carefully counted calories
like proportioned vegetables.

And I, whose seeds have grown from thorns,
wish my hands could have been there
before the strange hands entered
and pruned precious fruit too soon.
I would have formed fists to slam and to raise.
I would have screamed for the stringbean girls like you, dear Anne,
I would have always said,
"Lovely" is not enough to cover your bones.

Back to a Dandelion

The days when dandelions were flowers,
When calories did not spoil the taste,
Belongings were not lost but just misplaced,
And minutes slowly turned into hours.

Back when dirt was preferred over showers,
When every friendship was fully embraced,
Clothing style was based on mommy's taste,
And daddy had several superpowers.

The time when naps were like punishment,
When Santa filled every stocking with treats,
And when only Barbie needed new clothes.

Take me to a time of no commitment,
When we went hand in hand when crossing streets,
And when a dandelion was a *rose*.

Blue Eyes and Sunny Skies

He never changed, the man at the bus stop. Not his clothing, not his posture, not even his age. I suppose that's why I never bothered talking to him. Day after day after month after year, he sat silently. Rain or shine, summer or winter, he was there, with his gray coat, gray hair, gray hat. Even his skin had a tinge of gray to it, though it may just have been his soul showing through. I got older; the bus stopped coming; the movie ads plastered on the three little walls around him curled at the edges and went as gray as he, and all the while, he said not a word. But then, nor did I. Not until yesterday, at least.

I walked to work now, since the bus had stopped its circuit. I guess no one had bothered to tell the man. I almost didn't see him that morning. It was raining, so he blended with the sky and the air and the sidewalk. Why yesterday, I'll never know, but I stopped in front of the man. I laid my briefcase on the ground and sat next to him. I looked down at my suit, and noticed it matched the gray of his beard. I realized he'd been looking at my briefcase and the raindrops now breaking on it.

"Where are you headed?" I asked him.

He turned his vibrant gray eyes on my own, and said, "Anywhere."

We didn't talk for the rest of the day, just sat and watched the rain. When it got dark, I stood, lifted my dripping briefcase, walked home, and went to bed.

I woke this morning, and began my walk to work. The man was gone. He'd left no note, no fond farewell, just an empty, gray stretch of bench.

I quit my job this morning.

How to Plant a Room

Spread the soil thick enough,
deep enough that when you push your arm in,
you push it up to your shoulder,
and the carpet beneath is a memory,
like the memory of lying in your parents' bed,
on early mornings with your face cradled gently,
muffled gently between your mother and father's pillow.

When it's thick enough empty your pockets ,
empty them of all the things you liked to collect,
the things you collected when you were small:

Ivy leaves
and sticks
azalea flowers
and pollen stems of tiger lilies
 acorn caps
 and popped Impatiens pods

And things start to grow,
slitheringly grow as they hit the soil,
green where it wasn't before,
trees twisting thick to cover the wallpaper,
creamsicle wallpaper with Winnie the Pooh,
as I open the FRAGILE box to release them,
release the treefrogs and crickets

and all of the
unpronounceable birds.

Swimming Pool Poem 3

you dive into the pool eyes-first
you keep your fingers spread apart like candles
you receive you acquiesce
you're compressed and adjoined on all sides
you're a logical consequence now
you take a look around
you notice a coin or two sitting on the bottom
you turn
you push deeper in like a wound
you're a wound, you are a wound now
you reach the bottom you're delighted to find out it's not actually
 very hard to brake
you think maybe later you'll look up why this is
you'll probably forget
you scrape a coin up into your fingers
you hold it with a little love between thumb and index
you leave the other one two would ruin the thing this isn't you say
 to yourself about income
you turn you push the floor down with your feet
you plunge upwards
you're reminded of Tantalus in the garden
you think to yourself that this water would not tempt you at all it's
 clean in the medical sense it feels like a woman in latex gloves
 spat it out from her fingertips no good at all
you reach surface you suck in big gulping spills of oxygen
you raise your hand above the water the coin apparently slipped out
 of your hand on the way up
you peer back into the deepest part of the pool
the coins are sitting on the bottom again

Confessions of an Ex-Vegetarian

When I was in pre-school, my favorite food was ketchup. I remember my parents asked me what I wanted for dinner one night, and I answered, "Something with ketchup." My meal of preference was a hot dog bun, sans hot dog, with lots of ketchup.

I ate hamburgers at school and they were good, but when I told my dad I wanted hamburgers at home he brought back some pinkish-bloody-red things. "Ew, what's that?" I said. "That's not a hamburger. Hamburgers are brown."

"It will be brown after I cook it," my dad said.

I had never considered that the hamburger might be *made* of something, that it might be an animal. Before, it had just *been*.

My brother has always been a vegetarian. His claim today is that he has never eaten meat in his entire life. Once I took a Jell-O cup out of the fridge and he told me he didn't eat gelatin because it was made from goat bones. When I was in kindergarten we went out to an Italian restaurant and I ordered spaghetti and meatballs. "You want to try some, Jack?" I asked him. "It's really good."

"No thanks, I don't eat meat, remember?" he said.

I thought there must be some mistake. "There's no meat in meatballs," I said.

He and my parents laughed and laughed, and I laughed along with them because I wanted to fit in, but I didn't get it.

My favorite restaurant was McDonald's. My friend's dad would take us to get Happy Meals and I always ordered the chicken nuggets, dipped in lots of ketchup. Life was good.

Then, my grandpa came to visit. One afternoon it was just the two of us sitting in the living room, me in the rocking chair that I was scared was going to rock me all the way backward onto the floor. We were chewing the fat, as much as a five year old and an old man can. He said, "You know, I've been wondering. Your mom's a vegetarian, right?"

I nodded.

"And your dad's a vegetarian?"

"Yup."

"And your brother's a vegetarian?"

"Yeah, he's always been one."

"So then, why aren't you a vegetarian?"

I rocked on that one for a moment. "I don't know," I said. He was right, it didn't make any sense. "From now on, I'm not going to eat meat anymore."

And I never ate meat again.

I liked to tell that story all the way through high school. Whenever someone finds out you're a vegetarian, they ask the same questions. How long? Why? Was it hard? Do you ever want meat?

To which I replied: Since I was five. Insert story about grandpa. No, I just said I was going to stop and I stopped. No, I don't even remember what it tastes like.

I came to loathe meat, and even the people on the other end of the beef-laden fork. The smell made me want to gag. I learned about all the great reasons to be a vegetarian, and they became my subconscious mantra. I was being good to the environment. I was being good to my body. I was being good to animals locked away in factory farms being pumped up on growth hormones. I was healthy. I was clean. I advocated vegetarianism to everyone, but I was also a bit of a snob about it. I considered myself better than anyone who had been a vegetarian for less time than me, which in my age group was pretty much everyone. If someone refused meat and said they were a vegetarian, I immediately thrust myself into the conversation to make sure everyone knew I was too. I got jealous when someone else was being asked the Questions, so I would answer them anyway. How long? The hostess serving chicken parmigiana would ask. Two years, the poser would answer. Hah, like that's impressive, I thought. I've been one for ten years! I'd pipe in, unsuccessfully trying to be discreet about grabbing the attention.

I ate tons of soy products. Soy bacon, soy burgers, soy hot dogs, soy sausages, soymilk, soy pudding, soy beans. Lots of protein! A better, healthier protein. I judged meat eaters. I feel sorry for you, I thought as I chewed my tofu. You're feeding yourself poison. My logic: you eat meat, therefore your life must suck.

Another common question asked of the vegetarian (best if read in a tone of utter bewilderment): So, then, what do you *eat*?

It took all of my strength not to grab the person by the shoulders and shake them, yelling, what do you *think* I eat? Everything except meat! I never once felt deprived as a vegetarian; in fact, I became empowered by it. Being a vegetarian was a quality that came to define me. As I got older, I became more aware of what it stood for and I liked that it reflected my beliefs about animal advocacy and lowering your carbon footprint.

At summer camp I made friends with two other vegetarians, sisters, and we compared our stories. They were lifers like my brother, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to say I was a lifer, too, just to level the playing field. They were genuine animal lovers who had defied their omnivore parents, and didn't eat meat because they had stood up for what they truly believed in. I, on the other hand, had kind of been handed the vegetarian lifestyle on a platter, had never had to defy anyone. Life had actually gotten easier after I had given into vegetarianism, because the rest of my family was already on board. Another answer to a common vegetarian question: Was it hard to make the transition? No, it was easier for everyone. When I ate meat, my mother would make me a separate meal for dinner. When I became vegetarian, I ate what everybody else was eating.

I didn't tell any of this to my summer camp friends. They didn't have to know the simplicity of my situation, and my naiveté toward my lifestyle change. It was not hard, successful vegetarians like to say to one another, loud enough for the people eating hot dogs at the next table to hear. The struggle comes from putting up with a world full of meat eaters, who pollute the air with their wafting barbecue smells and insensitive practices. At a camp cookout, the two sisters and I stood away from the grills with our arms crossed and our noses turned up in disapproval, talking about how great we were and what a pig everyone else was waiting for hamburgers was.

As I grew up the chasm between meat and I became wider. Steakhouses repulsed me because of all the happy families gobbling up the remains of some innocent cow that had probably lived a miserable existence being prodded and fattened for the very purpose of the people's gluttony. I shrieked and turned away from fast

food commercials like they were horror films. When we watched documentaries about the fast food industry and factory farming in health class, I sat there smugly while the other students clutched their stomachs and made pie-crust promises about “never eating *that* again!” At least I was doing my part, I thought, even if all of these bozos continued to be ruthless murderers. I wouldn’t even step into a McDonald’s, let alone order anything, even if it was meat-free – I was against the principle of the company. I looked down on the world of meat eaters and especially fast food patrons: they were uninformed, apathetic, or cruel.

“You know what I’ve realized about myself,” I told my mother one morning. “Meat repulses me so much, I don’t even consider it to be a food. I could never imagine eating it.” I was so happy, so satisfied with myself for being who I was, for being completely distanced from animal meat, for understanding what I was doing and for being a good person in mind and practice. Life was good.

The autumn of my senior year of high school, I became very sick. I had no idea what was wrong with me for several months. I was eating what I thought was the healthiest food possible, exercising nearly every day, yet gaining weight. Not only that: I was losing my hair, my memory, my concentration; I was constantly angry and anxious. I felt sick after every meal, I didn’t digest any food, and I was always exhausted. Finally, after four different doctors, I was diagnosed with Hashimoto’s disease, and then with hypothyroidism.

What followed was a year of trial and error, a long story for another day. Even after my medicine was regulated, it took several more months and doctors to finally determine that I was gluten intolerant, which had played a large role in my digestive problems. I could also no longer eat soy because it is a thyroid inhibitor, which knocked out a major food group for me.

Two weeks left before I headed off to college my parents and I decided I should visit a naturopath. The short version of this doctor’s visit: how I felt trumped the numbers on the chart. I was still in crummy shape, but with a diligent, brand new diet regime I could improve my health and eventually get myself off of medicine altogether. This doctor really knew what she was talking about, and I

listened to her eagerly, glad I was at last in capable hands. I was going to be fixed. I was going to feel better. I was going to have to eat meat.

Wait, what?

Yes, the doctor said. You have protein, fat, and iron deficiencies. You need protein and fat with every meal, and that protein will have to be some kind of meat most of the time.

But, isn't there any other way—? I prayed.

No. If you don't eat meat, your body will deteriorate. You can start with chicken for something easy, but you're going to have to eat beef at least once a week.

I didn't get it. Hadn't I just determined that I didn't consider meat to be a food? I could feel tears in my eyes. This couldn't be happening.

But it was. The next day, my mother decided it would be a great idea to fry up some bacon, her personal childhood favorite. She said she would lend her support by eating bacon with me (nothing else, sorry). There was just something about that salty, sizzling, smoky ham that she would be willing to make an exception for and sacrifice her vegetarianism, for my sake, of course. The whole house smelled like buttery, crispy pig. My mother relished it; I skirted around my solitary piece, eating everything else on my plate. I took one little nibble of the bacon, because everyone was looking at me expectantly, but the flavor was too strong. I admitted defeat.

A couple of days later, we tried again. My mother and I picked up a single serving of chicken masala at a gourmet grocery. Here we were, my mother buying me separate meals again like when I was five. I ate alone in the kitchen out of the Tupperware from the store. I was expecting someone to literally hold my hand as I took my first bite, or at least offer their condolences, but nobody did. I choked it down, lathering each bite in as much sauce as possible so I couldn't tell what it tasted like. Then I marched into the living room and announced I had eaten my first piece of chicken. Nobody seemed to care. And that was that, I was officially a meat eater.

I didn't know how I could face my friends, the ones who had suffered around my haughtiness at their meat consumption our entire childhood. I couldn't. Luckily, I was going away to college in a week, where nobody knew me, where nobody would have to know

my history. I looked around and tried not to seem too uncomfortable as I took a piece of grilled chicken in the dining hall on the first day of school. I wanted to justify each bite, to explain that I had been, for all intents and purposes, a lifelong vegetarian, and that I really didn't want to eat this, that I had to, that I'd much rather be eating the grilled tofu, that life simply wasn't fair. But I didn't say anything and nobody pointed at me and gasped, nobody scolded me, nobody said, how *dare* you eat that poor, innocent bird!

Now I knew more about vegetarianism, the real information, than I had when I was a vegetarian. I had learned that vegetarianism has never been historically practiced for longer than four months at a time, and was traditionally only used to cleanse the body before returning to meat consumption. When vegetarianism was practiced in these short periods, it was a time of little physical and mental activity, a period of meditation, when the body needed less of the essential protein, fat, and iron from meat. Vegetarianism was never prescribed to children because of the essential role meat plays in healthy growth and development. All of my misconceptions about soy were shattered, too. Apparently, soy was never eaten as much as it is today, and although in small amounts pure soy is beneficial to the average consumer, generally in modern times it is eaten in large quantities and in processed forms, such as tofu and soymilk, which are actually detrimental to one's health.

Still, being a vegetarian was part of who I had been for so long, and although I knew I was eating meat for medicinal reasons, becoming an ex-vegetarian was a difficult transition. I blindly made my way from dish to dish, figuring out how to cut and chew certain things, still steering clear of any pig products. Nobody seems to notice when you're stumbling into a meat eating world. Nobody asks you questions, none of the questions asked of vegetarians. There was no: How long? Why? Was it hard? Do you ever crave tofu? Do you ever just want to have a plate that doesn't have animal carcass on it? I had much more to say about becoming a meat eater than becoming a vegetarian, much more to get off of my chest and sort through for myself, and yet nobody was interested.

I wonder if a part of me is lost now that I am an omnivore, trapped in a vegetarian's body. I wonder if anybody would even

care to know that, in principle, I am such a strong supporter of vegetarianism. That not so long ago, when my friend asked if I were starving on a desert island, would I eat a hamburger? I could only muster a maybe, even though deep down I was thinking no. And I know that I couldn't go back, no matter what, that my health is more important than any of this, yet I can't help but feel like a stranger to myself when I look down at my knife and fork cutting up beef.

All around me, my perception has changed. A couple of months ago I overheard the conversation from the table next to mine at dinner. A girl had a plate of mashed potatoes, bread, and asparagus. The boy said, "So, you're a vegetarian?"

The girl nodded, dipping her fork into her heap of potatoes.

"That's pretty cool. I think I could do that, except, you know, you need meat."

The girl shrugged apathetically. "I mean, I'm still alive," she said.

For the first time in my life, I felt sorry for a vegetarian.

The Naming of Daughters

Never name your daughter Chastity
She'll spend her whole life proving you wrong
It's the same with Purity or Innocence
I promise she won't be those either

I hit it from the back
Gripping pale love handles
Tugging on thick snakes of black hair

Never name your daughter after a saint
She'll spend her whole life proving that she isn't one
Never name your daughter after Catherine of Sweden
The patron saint protecting against abortions

I'm up inside her ribs
Her mouth muzzled by blue pillows
My hips pump against pimpled butt cheeks

Never name your daughter Virginia
It sounds too much like virginity
And she will lose hers before her 16th birthday
To the starting quarterback at Virginia Tech

Blood seeps from between her legs
Virginity leaks from her crotch
I don't stop pumping

Never name your daughter after Agnes of Rome
The Patron Saint of Virgins
The Patron Saint of Chastity
The Patron Saint of Rockville Centre, New York

Where I met Hope
Where I took everything from her
Where I rode her for hours like an animal

Never name your daughter Hope
Because once I'm done with her
She won't have any left

Berman Museum Photographs

**Based on Robert Frank's photographs from the exhibit in the Berman last year.
The title of each poem is also the title of the photograph it was written about.*

I. *Frogmore SC 1955*

Those pearls around your neck, tell me how much
Did you save from your paycheck, how many months
Before you finally entered the clean and secret world
Of the shop window?

Or tell me they were your mothers and you watched
As she opened the dark jewelry box and pulled
Strands that could melt in your mouth like ice
Cream under your tongue?

Either way, they're yours now, and so is the man
His face both harder and softer than when you met
Fifteen years ago and with a smile. Don't tell me
Your boy's never gonna get in any trouble.

Just tell me the pearls are real.

II. *[Untitled; de Kooning and child in NYC, n.d.]*

Elbows on the table means
I like to smile and
think funny things like
what if crayons were candles and
breathed out smoke like
you and your cigarettes, daddy, but

in colors because
I just like colors and
did you know that
the way we are sitting in wooden chairs means
you love me because
there is only one coffee cup on the table and
it is full of orange juice because
I don't like coffee but
we both know that you do.

Run

“No!!!”

“Get up!” Sarah grabbed my pillow.

“You know I hate cleaning,” I lamented as I got out of bed. Red plastic cups and empty bottles covered the table in the center of the small dorm room.

“Was it at least fun?” She picked up a red bandana that had fallen from a hook near the closet.

“Of course it was and it’s a good thing that not everyone stays in and does homework like you. If these messes never happened, the plastic cup companies would be screwed.”

“What’s this?” She playfully waved a red bandana in the air like a flag. I stared at it loosely rippling in the air.

Suddenly, I was back in Spain.

The first rocket popped in the background of the song, a prayer for protection. We were closed in on both sides by high walls, ahead, a steep uphill road curved to the left. “¡Olé! ¡Olé-olé-olé! ¡Olé! ¡Olé!” Hundreds of voices called out, screamed at fate. “¡Olé! ¡Olé-olé-olé! ¡Olé! ¡Olé!”

The crowd grew wilder with the song as nervous chatter in Spanish, French, English and other tongues made an indecipherable static in the background. All of them in their own way praying, planning, and joking past the fear. You could see it in their faces, though. Past their runner’s pose, past the look of intensity on some of their faces, in their eyes, the fear was there. They were all thinking the same thing: *what am I doing here?*

The second rocket exploded and silences the song. *RUN!*

“Chris, where did you just go off to in your head?” Sarah asked, nearly dropping the bandana.

“Pamplona.”

“Where?”

“Pamplona, Spain.”

The words brought me back there again, this time earlier, to the taxi on the way to the run.

“San Fermin, please.” My mother asked the taxi driver.

“Oh, you are going to run?” The driver replied.

"No, but he is." She said, pointing at me.

It was 7:30am, vastly too early for one to be risking their life. I was wearing the white t-shirt, white pants, red sash and red bandana around my neck that was the traditional uniform for runners. It was fresh out of the thin plastic packaging I found it in when I looked in the closet at the hotel. The shirt was still sporting fold lines near the small hotel logo on the left side of the chest.

The bandana was made of some sort of polyester fabric. The sash was knitted red cotton and was the length of a belt. Below the uniform, a muddied pair of old indoor soccer shoes with worn down treads, way more worn down than I had thought. Both were intensely red, the same color as a matador's cape. We were human targets.

"¡Muy bien!" The driver exclaimed as he turned down one of the winding roads. "You know, San Fermin has been going on since the fourteenth century, very old tradition, sí... very old."

I pulled up a file I had on my phone on the rules and tips for the run. There hadn't been a chance to look it over until now, but it was a mix of local laws and helpful tips:

- 1) If you are visibly drunk, you will not be allowed to run. *Check.*
- 2) It is highly suggested that you wear the proper uniform. *Check.*
- 3) Photography is not allowed if you are a runner as it is a distraction. *Ok.*
- 4) Bulls run wide so stay tight on turns. *Still ok.*
- 5) It is illegal to touch the bulls. Violators will be arrested once bulls have moved on. *What? If one gores me, I better see it behind bars!*
- 6) Falling is common. If this occurs DO NOT TRY TO STAND UP. Most deadly goring's happen when a person falls and tries to get up. As you raise your chest to waist level it is the same height as a charging bull's horns. *Great.*
- 7) Being trampled does not normally lead to death. *Normally?*

We got out at the Cuesta de Santo Domingo, the official starting spot of the run. The crowd boomed with runners and the

audience, drinks in hand, waiting for the run to begin. The street sloped steeply uphill from the main road as the crowd led us to the starting point.

Walls towered ten feet high on either side, like brick fortress walls on both sides of the road. There were stairs on either side that allowed the hundreds of audience members to watch from the tops of the walls. From this point on, I was on my own.

The turn ahead was so razor sharp that you can only see the wall continuing stretching to five floor apartments on the right. Each one was painted a light sand color and each floor had a balcony packed with people watching the run. The balconies' black rod iron railings kept people packed together tightly like sardines in a tin. There were supposed to be paramedics close by each turn but there was no sign of them on this one.

White confetti fell like snowflakes from the skyscraper walls beside us. We were trapped but definitely not alone. I began to focus on the run.

The herd runs an average speed of 15mph. The fastest human being, Usain Bolt, ran a top speed of 28mph, but that was only for 100 meters. The San Fermin course is 826 meters and crowded in narrow streets. Even Bolt would be worried.

I could feel my foot slip on the wet cobblestone below. This was the second day of the run. Each night the path was host to huge parties that apparently involved showers of spilled beer and wine. It gave the cobblestone a slight purple hue and the feel of wet river stones covered with a slimy layer of algae. The smell of the old wine mixed in with the smell of over a hundred men preparing themselves to run for their lives.

13 people have died since 1910.

The second rocket went off. It meant that the whole of the herd, six bulls and six oxen in the first wave with three oxen in the second have been released. My pulse raced. I could hear my heartbeat above the crowd's cheering. We ran.

"So you never explained what you were doing in Spain, or what that bandana was about." She said as she poked at the small pile of tater tots with her fork. We had given up, well... I had given up on cleaning, so we went to breakfast.

"That was the bandana from the uniform I wore during the run."

"The Running of the Bulls? You never told me about that! How was it?"

There's really no way to explain what it was really like, no way to make her feel it, so I said what I always say. "It was fun." I looked back down at my eggs and my mind wandered away again.

Screaming, the sounds of a hundred shoes pounding on stone, the crowd cheering; we stampeded forward. A herd of animals running from a beast that is bigger, stronger, and faster than themselves. You just can't really understand it until you've been one of those weaker animals in the herd.

I looked back for a split second. I could see a rip through the solid block of runners coming closer like a boat cutting through the sea. Red bandanas pushed aside, some under, but more importantly heading this way.

We cut around the first blind corner into an equally narrow street. Halfway to the Plaza del Ayuntamiento, on the left was a fenced off section behind which stood two dozen television and cameras and photographers. We make it to the Plaza, the approximate quarter distance point of the run. *Plenty of space, I'll face them here.*

They were coming. The screams grew louder, some of joy, some of pain. I wait for it, let the screams grow louder. No more running from them, time to run with them.

The average bull is 6ft tall, not including the horns.

"Weren't you scared?" Sarah asked.

"I guess."

"What was your favorite part?"

"I don't know."

You never really get an idea of how wide five feet of horn is until it is coming right at you. The first bulls had broken ahead of the other four. Ahead of them were two kinds of runners. Those that ran beside or even in front of them, thrill-seeking, but clever. And those that ran frantically away from the bulls as fast as possible, without regard to anyone around them. The latter are the dangerous ones.

As the bulls came in, I began to run again, pacing them to try to run beside. Before the bulls could get to me, a wave of panicked

runners pushed me to the guard fence. One of the bulls veered far to the right chasing one of the panicked runners. They were coming right at me.

I jumped onto the white wooden fence. I looked straight into the face of a cameraman, and his camera lens as I held on. The runner and the bull passed by within inches of me.

My only chance to run beside them now was to get to the curve of Calle Estafeta, possibly one of the most dangerous sections of the run. My heart pounded in my chest as I began to feel my pulse beat against the bandana. Ahead was a wall of high apartments that looked like a dead end if not for runners making the sharp turn close to the buildings. I got to the curve just as the next four bulls galloped in. *Stay tight, bulls run wide.*

I found myself running with them. The bull to the far right, closest to the inside of the curve, was making eye contact with me. I stared back. The sound of the crowd disappeared. *Keep running.*

I could see each of the huge muscles in its neck. The dirt and scrapes in its horns. The raspy sound of its heavy breathing as it fought to keep going. Then I saw something in its eyes that I hadn't an instant before. It was fear.

I looked across to the far left of the four bulls. A runner was getting trampled, then another. Everything slowed down. I looked closely at my bull; he was running for his life like I was. Unlike him, though, if I got through this I would be fine. For him, getting to the stadium meant that eventually he would die at the hands of a matador: a warrior's death. I ran with him for a second longer. *Roll.*

I rolled under the fence. A thick pool of mud made of spilled wine, empty beer bottles and trash covered me as I barely made it under. I pulled myself up and turned to see the last of the bulls galloping into the swarm of runners.

"So, would you do it again?" Sarah's voice broke in across the table of coffee cups.

"Definitely."

Truth or Dare

Dare: Take off your clothes.

I drop my pants first. Quickly they plummet
Strangling skinny ankles. Confiscate black jock bra.

Truth: I'm naked.

Exposed. In the buff, birthday suit God gave me.
Pale flesh. It's out there. All of it, out there.

Dare: Lie vertical.

Pale walls, skin, everything bland.
Oceans drape over chest, abdomen, groin, legs, and feet.

Truth: I'm awake.

I can see everything, hear everything, feel everything.
My atria, my ventricles on the screen. Needle within vein.
Oxygen invades nostrils. No gas mask. No counting
Back. I'm conscious. Wide awake.

Dare: Let them tie you down.

I will be their hostage if, together, we can win.
Team: surgeons on offense, nurses on defense,
Anesthesiologist on deck.
Truth: I'm the ball.

Dare: Let them sneak wires into you.

Allow metal to pierce through artery.
Let them weave through vessels where
Your blood flows hot. Feel cold,
Feel exposed. Feel helpless, hopeless, hapless.

Truth: They are igniting vital organ.

Adrenaline thrashing through my insides in a fit of terror.

Dare: Let them burn the badness out.

Feel heat scorch, let it dissolve the years.

Anna Lorine

Recognize machines mocking, squawking,
Perceive the lead athlete cursing.

Dare: Don't you curse.
Be still. Be quiet. Listen.
Fell them resetting your metronome.
Offer the elephant on your chest a peanut.

The Song of Remembrance, L'vov, Poland, 1940

Though time may rub away the traces,
let them remember this place.
Let someone alive to recount the time
my mother Rivke devoured a flaky pastry,
luring Avram in with powdered sugar
and strawberry cream.

I pray that someone kept the photographs:
Rivke and Avram doing a polka,
promenading as a young couple down the cobblestoned Prospekt,
glowing newlyweds under their wedding canopy.
May they remember Mama
cradling Friday candlelight in her palms,
and my father the rabbi
praying by a temple's eastern wall.

May those who will stay
remember when neighbors
vanished behind walls, into trucks and train cars.
May they memorize this outskirted cemetery,
where buried on a sunlit hill
beneath stones crooked like teeth
rest Lampkes and Rosenthals, last witnesses
of this misplaced third.

One day, may someone seek out familiar names
carved into forgotten headstones, amid
contradictory telephone poles.
May they heavy their pockets with pebbles,
and there leave
a candle and a blessing.
May I be there to return the favor.

Lunch at Caltort

I take a sip of iced tea. We're at our booth where we've sat one other time this week and three times last week. I've sat here without Brenna and Jackie, with the rugby team, at least six times, at least four times with my sister, and once with my high school friends last summer.

Brenna says, "I think you can't differentiate between wanting to fuck someone and being in love because you've never been in love."

I eye up Jackie. Her tacos look good. She takes a bite.

What I really want to say is, I have actually been in love plenty of times inside my head. I think, I probably know what it's like to be in love. I am an introvert.

I take a bite of my burrito. It's definitely better than Jackie's tacos.

I realize with profound simplicity that I feel like that day in fifth grade where Mr. Schwartz split us up by cards we picked out of a hat that would assign you a race. The white cards meant you were white, the black cards meant you were black, and its purpose was to teach us what it felt like for black kids in America in the '60s. And I was the kid that picked the white card right before the one black kid in the class was about to pick. His name was Wilkons Hatton, and he obviously picked a card that put him on the black side. And everyone was silent, teacher, students, and you know everyone in the room wished that Wilkons Hatton could have been put on the white side instead of me.

I sip my iced tea, again. We are at California Tortilla and I ordered a crunchy barbeque ranch burrito because it makes me feel fucking awesome. The combination of ranch and barbeque really makes me feel great. The words, "feel great," mean something different to all of us. And we are always different. At Literary Society Aly told Brenna that the poem Brenna had written three years ago wasn't Brenna's poem anymore. I could not believe it, and I still can't believe it. Brenna may have been surrounded by different circumstances and had a completely different world view, but surely she could still dive into those circumstances and relate to the poem

from her former state of mind. I take a bite of burrito.

My silence unnoticed, Brenna and Jackie have moved on. They are talking about one of the times during the semester when they studied abroad together in Italy, how the compilation of these times were the best times. I cut up my burrito, setting it up for rhythmic bites. I want this pleasure to continue with concurrent beats. I need to enjoy this burrito very precisely because, pathetic or not, it's the best part of my day.

I listen to them describe a specific time in their water color class in Italy with jealous interest. I feel like me and Brenna sit around and talk because we're writers and we're really good at reliving our greatest moments but we never actually have any. What I mean is this. We're always talking about this amazing time or that amazing time but never throughout a time do we turn to each other and say, this is the most amazing time of our lives.

I think colleges are so obsessed with the celebrities that went there because it says this to its students: J.D. Salinger went here, therefore you can be as famous, as well-known and accomplished as J.D. Salinger. That possibility exists for you.

I take a bite of burrito. I picture the four people who have won the J.D. Salinger award, and I assign them jealous awe.

Brenna and Jackie are talking about all the boys that they thought were hot, but that they were unable to develop an attraction to because they were in a relationship. They are likening this to the girls I've been in love with but that weren't gay. As though this will help them understand their confusion that I would be in love with someone who wasn't also gay. I wonder if they know what it's like to have someone in the lowest pocket of their brains, to walk everywhere and wonder if what it looks like from Brittany or Ava or Alice's eyes, to tap into their flowing possibilities during class and imagine their fingertips and their voices and how I might feel once I've imagined them saying things. Not saying, "I love you," but saying the things in between. The things that imply. Like the word, "you," or the word "lips," or, "did you eat lunch yet today?" and how these things are different when saying them to someone you're in love with. I wonder if they know what it's like to see flowers and immediately look in their wallets to see if they have enough money to buy the

beautiful flowers for the beautiful pocketed person. I've had eight of them, and I told all their names to Brenna the other night, and I wrote down their names on a piece of paper at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. They're stuck in that wall, and those eight clumps of syllables have all been so deeply ingrained inside my emotions that I know they'll never see daylight again except through my eyes.

I take a bite of burrito followed by a large sip of iced tea.

I think, I must be an introvert. I think of that time a few days ago in Wismer when I remembered Eric Hutchinson singing in one of his songs that everyone has a love, but they keep it inside when we get lost in the back of our minds (lyrically). And I looked around the table trying to penetrate the back of my friends' minds, wondering what that glimmering special hope they were all holding while they discussed the food the dining hall decided to serve. I think of the time in neuroscience when we learned about the clinical study that proved that convicted felons have, on average, a much lower level of serotonin in their brains than the free people. And the time on my bike when I discovered with a flourish of a soberly-drawn conclusion that the amount of money your parents have when you are born is as much a life determinant as the pattern of your DNA.

I think, I must be an introvert. I take a bite of my burrito, dipping it in queso this time. I feel a surge of pride that I know that the word "queso" means "cheese," not from this mainstreamed societal restaurant, but from Spanish class in eighth grade. Brenna and Jackie are talking about their past relationships. I think of my relationships. This is the first time I'm picturing Shane or John or Jake without desperate need. I think of the exchange in relationships... how some people trade time for love or blow jobs for love or sex for pleasure but I was trading all these things for social acceptance. I can imagine Shane in his T-shirt, his cross country uniform, his arm around me in the hallway and I feel us becoming untied. I take a bite of burrito. The cross country meet when Shane kissed me... he said he wanted a good luck kiss. And I kissed him at the starting line, but I was looking over his shoulder to see if Ava would see us kiss. Sometimes I would kiss Shane and imagine that I was kissing Brittany. Which proves that my DNA is just as much a life determinant as the amount of money my parents had when I was

born.

"Want a chip?" Brenna says, reaching me directly. She doesn't usually order chips.

"Yeah, thanks," I say. And then I say, "Have you thought about going to graduate school in New York City?" which forces us to once again confront that wall that it's time to pick between elementary harbored dreams and the real world. Because it's suddenly possible that instead of becoming that lawyer in the suit I drew in my dream career assignment in fourth grade, I could wind up as the night shift manager at Abercrombie.

"Yeah, I would actually love to go to New York City," Brenna says, and I'm thinking about an MFA from NYU, about being a writer, about my constant shock that Creative Writing is a minor and that the college will give me grades for being myself. I think of dreams. I eat the last, large bite of my burrito and acknowledge, wholeheartedly, three things: I am definitely an introvert and I just ate 950 calories and did not exercise today. Now I will never know what it's like to be in love.

Headlights

My mother's hands are small and slightly curved with rheumatoid.
Pain.

My father's hands are rough with thick veins like speed bumps.
Work.

They have wrinkled and withered since the time I remember holding
them so I wouldn't get

lost.

My mother's hands were smooth and gentle,
fixing my ponytail and cooling my hot forehead.

My father's hands were steady and strong,
lifting me up to see over bald heads.

I thought they were perfect.

My father's hands took care of other things later on in life.
He let me get swallowed in the crowd.

My mother's hands seemed to shrink in disappointment.
I measured mine against hers and they were the same size.

My hands are not special.
They're broken
headlights looking for people who don't exist anymore.

Prayer of Thanks

Thank god you don't understand poetry,
thank god you don't see the future like I do,
endless, yes, and open, but thank god
you see some countryless place
where our problems don't matter for as long

as I am here, in the corner of your arm,
my bare feet on the tall edge of the couch,
you in socks, braced against the coffee table.
Thank god you keep believing
for as long as there is good cold beer,
and we've found something worth watching on TV.
Thank god you can't see the whirring in my head
that feels nothing like clockwork
but counts down all the same. Thank god you don't know
I could tell you exactly how long we have left
before we have to say goodbye again. Thank god I believe
you don't know any of this.

A Little Sincerity

"Anyone who ever gave you confidence, you owe them a lot."

— Truman Capote

I can't see ahead of me. It's late at night and I'm following Dan's footsteps into the forest that lies along the path behind my house. We step through a cleared patch, and I'm blind until Dan flicks the lighter. The flame thickens broadly along the tip of our joint, and Dan exhales tufts of smoke to put it out. He pulls it again to catch the ember, and his face glows warm and orange. His left cheek is sunken in from a fight he'd won years ago over a girl he's since forgotten, but it's only improved his appearance. Now when he smiles a thick, natural dimple creases the edge of his smile. He inhales broadly and passes the joint to me before bouncing on the balls of his feet. With each pull the ember's light swells, circling a glow between the two of us that leaves everything else darker. Dan jumps about in the cold air. Only when I pass it back does he pause to stand, and his outline shines full in the light between us. Once he hands it back he begins again, loping like a loose pendulum and swaying in and out of sight.

"So what are we doing after this?" he asks.

"I don't know, probably just going back home, I guess."

"Nah, fuck that. We've been there all day; let's go somewhere."

"Where would we even go? It's already past midnight. Besides, I have work to do." By now I can't help but sway from the smoke. I don't want to be around strangers.

"Dude are you fucking kidding me? It's a Friday night. Besides, you've had all day to do that work and you've just napped and stared at walls instead."

"I didn't stare at walls," I say.

"Oh bullshit. You remember when you took that shower around five, 'to try and wake up?' I found you an hour later, on your bed, staring at the ceiling and still wearing only the towel."

"So what?"

"So the shit's getting a little agoraphobic dude. It's already our

second year in college, and you've been to one party. I invite you to the city every damn weekend, and yet the only time I see you is when I have to come back. I'm not supposed to be losing this much train fare on the suburbs, man, even for you."

"I don't know, it's just that though, isn't it? It's the fucking suburbs; what should I do?"

"Fucking anything, that's what I'm trying to tell you. Just make some waves. Why don't we go to the Gas 'n' Gulp?"

"We go there every day."

"Exactly, so it won't be that daunting," he says.

"What's the point?"

"The point is I want ice cream and you're starting to bum me the fuck out. Another couple weeks and you will genuinely look like a Drug Abstinence commercial. Your cats are gonna start scheduling PSAs to warn children about becoming you." We stand there for a moment as the joint burns out.

"Who's working?" I ask.

"Who gives a shit?"

"Well that one guy's always leering at me every time I come in. Even when I'm not high he spooks the hell out of me."

"Which one? The tubby guy? He's all right. He's just a little forward because I don't think he has many people outside of that job to talk to. He gives me extra meat on my sandwiches for free."

"No, no; I'm cool with him. It's one of the cashiers."

"Yeah? Which one? Tony? Susan?"

"I don't know his name."

"Oh! Is it the brown one?" Dan grins broadly as I start to cough.

"You can't call him that."

"He tells me to! Actually he goes by just 'Brown,' but my point's the same. His name's Akkham. He's a pretty good guy, what don't you like about him?"

"I don't know, he's just leery. He's always staring at me."

"Oh whatever. You've probably never even tried talking to him. This is just old post-9/11 Muslim paranoia. The kid was born in Trenton."

"It's not 9/11 paranoia. I know that much."

"It probably is. People have been more skittish than they want to believe ever since that happened."

"It's not that, the kid's just weird. And how would you know? We were ten. All I remember from that day was being upset that recess was cancelled."

"That's cause you didn't know anyone involved. Plus you don't know any brown people."

"You can't call them—"

"I knew people. My mother was supposed to be there. Her friend was on the third floor. He heard people splattering against the sidewalks while he ran out. Can you imagine that?"

"No dude, and I don't want to."

"That's my point. You didn't notice a change because you didn't look to find it. People jumped from the hundredth floor. That's over a thousand feet. Try to put that to terms. What would you do if you were on the hundredth fucking floor? Do you know what you'd do?"

"No, I really don't. I can't imagine."

"You would fucking jump man. You'd have to. Because it'd either be that, or to wait for the building to collapse." He snatches the unlit joint from me and relights it. "And that's why we need to go to the Gas 'n' Gulp."

"Because people are dying so that I can smoke weed and buy ice cream?"

"No, because whether we have forty years left, or forty seconds, we have to do something. Even if it's just to jump, especially if it's to jump, we all have to do something. Because then maybe someone will take a picture, or someone will see, and they'll tell someone else, and they'll remember, and this will have mattered."

Dan isn't bouncing anymore, and I'm not swaying.

"You can be a real dick."

~

Sure enough he's working the register. I avoid eye contact as Dan waves hello and instead pace towards the sandwich counter. The tubby guy is making sandwiches, and when I order I ask if he couldn't help me out with extra meat.

"Heh, are you kidding me?" He points to the scale beside

him. "Trying to get me fired?"

"I don't, I mean, I meant just to add it. I uh, forgot to say it earlier."

He shakes his head and I hobble towards Dan. He's already in line and cradling gallon of ice cream. There's one other guy in front of us, dressed completely in sweats and slouching. As we stand in line a woman walks in and stands blankly at the entrance for a moment.

"Holy shit, buddy." Dan whispers to me.

"What?"

"Tell me you see this."

The woman is gorgeous. She's dressed for an occasion in a taut black dress that's slit down her sides with a plunging neckline, and her thick red hair sways uniformly like a tumbling roll of silk across the cool white of her skin.

"She's also cutting right in front of all of us." Dan's eyebrows raise. He has to elbow me hard in the ribs for my attention. "Dude, you're breathing through your mouth."

"Shit, thanks." I seal up.

"You should go talk to her."

"Why would I?"

"Because she shouldn't get away with abusing her beauty like that for a pack of Virginia Slims. Were you not listening to me earlier? You can either be the man who asserts a little respect to this woman, and earns her respect for it, or you can sit here and wind up like the frumpy fuck that's in front of us, wearing entire sweat outfits and letting the prettier people of the world push you around."

"What would I even say?"

"Just don't say what you did with that one girl. What was it? Oh yeah, 'I really can be so helplessly delicate.'" Dan giggles and almost drops his ice cream. The woman turns to leave.

"Alright, fine, watch this," I say. I wait until she's closer to the door, and start to walk forward. Dan clenches my shoulder with his free hand.

"Well what the fuck now?" I hiss. The woman is gone.

"You don't want any part of this."

Dan's not laughing, but whispering very slowly and shuddering. I look back from the woman's trace and follow Dan's eye

line. The man in front of us is holding a gun at Akkham.

"Give me the money in the register man." The man's arm is shaking slightly. The gun barrel flickers across Akkham's features.

"I, I can't."

"I know you can't, whatever. Just fucking give it to me. This thing is real."

"No, I, I want to. Physically I can't do it. Once an item's been scanned this register won't open without a transaction. I already scanned your Pepsi. I, I really can't do it."

"Listen, you little Pakistani fuck --- don't bullshit me over nine bucks an hour, all right?! It's not fucking worth it. Now give me the money, or I will fucking kill you." He cocks the hammer back.

I can't breathe. Dan is flat on the ground with his hands over his head, and I fall behind him. The sandwich guy is gone, maybe hidden under the counter. It's only the four of us now. Akkham sways back and forth, trying to share eye contact between the man and the gun.

"Listen, either you open this thing, or I shoot it to hell. Don't make me fucking mangle you just to steal the money anyway."

Akkham doesn't answer. The silence holds us. Then a soft sob breaks from a different direction. I look to my right and see that it's Dan, his whole body flat and shaking. The gunman speaks again, and his voice cracks through the store.

"All right, that's it—" He grabs Akkham by the collar and presses the gun to his temple.

"Wait!"

I've screamed out from the ground. For a moment I almost clasp a hand over my mouth, unsure what I've said. The man pivots and glares at me.

"What the fuck?"

"He, he said the machine will open with a card right?" I ask.

"Yeah, so what?" The man presses the gun in harder.

"So, I was going to pay for this sandwich with my card, and that should open the register, and that means you don't have to do anything else." I don't move. The man stares for a moment at me on the floor, and then at Akkham shivering and dripping, and then back to me. He releases the hammer of his gun.

"Alright, fine, go. Now."

I scramble to the counter and stuff the receipt in Akkham's hand. He has to steady it with the other to get a clean reading. I open my wallet and nearly have to do the same to get my card out. It fumbles from my hand and falls to the floor.

"Fucking get on with it!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I rush to pick up the card and scan it quickly. A minute follows as the machine blankly reads "processing..." I can feel the man's body heat behind me. A bright chirp cracks from the machine, and the register slides open. The man throws me back to the ground and reaches over the counter. Singles and fives spill from his hands as he sprints out the door.

I stay on the ground and hear Dan's sobs peter into silence. Soon I'm standing and so is he. Akkham is no longer shaking or wide eyed. The tubby man never comes back. At first we only look at each other blankly. Dan's staring at me, his face still damp.

"You're breathing through your mouth." I tell him. We both start to smile before breaking into a laughter that leaves us heaving and teary. Once we calm down I look over to Akkham. He's still massaging his head and staring at me.

"What the fuck, man?" he asks.

"I know, that was unbelievable," I say.

"No, I mean what the fuck is wrong with you?"

I stand frozen, and look to Dan and then back to Akkham.

"What?" I ask.

"I asked what the fuck is wrong with you. I almost had him."

"Almost...had him?"

"He was going to leave! I could have gotten him out of here, and he wouldn't have had any money."

"What are you talking about? He was going to kill you!"

"Like fuck he was – over this place?! The register didn't have more than 200 bucks in it. No one would've killed over that."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I say.

"I'll tell you what I do fucking know. I know that if I'd gotten him to leave empty-handed, I could have sued this place for putting me in jeopardy. Now that he's gotten away with the money, that's gonna be counted as negligence, and the owner of this place can sue

me. I'm not even supposed to be here without a manager. You know how much I could have gotten out of an emotional distress case? I could've paid for college! Now my family will be ruined by some run down gas station owner. Fuck you. I've already called the cops."

"Called the..." I look to Dan. His eyes are wide. "Dude, I can't be here."

"We can't run out though. Stay here, stay calm, once we explain everything it'll all be fine."

The store's white interior begins to strobe blue and red. Two patrolmen walk in, one after the other. Though one is far taller than the other, both are thick with equipment. They thumb their belts as if to release pressure from their large stomachs, and both move immediately to Akkham.

"So what happened here?" The taller one asks.

"I was here running my shift, when some guy in sweats pulled a gun on me and told me to empty the register."

"And then what happened?"

"Well I tried as best I could to deter him officer, to tell him that he wouldn't be able to get in. This store offers a reward, you know, for whoever manages to prevent a robbery. He was about to leave when that kid over there stopped him." He points to me.

"Wait what?" For a moment I don't register what he's saying. I look to Dan to confirm what I've heard. His face is pale and empty.

"You heard me. This lunatic, he just jumps up while this man is still pointing a gun in my face – thank god he didn't startle the man outright – but he just jumps up, and tells the guy that he can scan his card and open the register. Which was true. And so of course once the guy hears that, there was no hope of reasoning with him."

Now the shorter cop is walking towards me while the tall one asks Akkham more questions.

"So this kid just jumped in, right in the middle of a stick up?"

"I couldn't believe it either, officer. I think he might've been in on the scheme, like a decoy or something."

"That's not true, I was trying to help – he was going to kill you!" I start screaming.

"Whoa whoa, let's calm it down now partner. Jim, check out this kid's story," says the taller cop. The shorter one reaches out to

grab my shoulder. I shrug it off.

"No, listen to me, he's lying! Dude, come on... 'Brown'... tell them the truth!" My voice booms and then quiets as I plead. Akkham screams back.

"What the fuck did you call me?! You see this, right, officer? He's hurling epithets! He was about to get away with it, that's why he's flying into this rage!"

"Hurling epithets, are you serious?!" I storm towards Akkham behind the counter. The shorter cop doesn't wait. He seizes both my shoulders, twists me around, and cuffs me. Over the struggle he calls to his partner.

"I don't know about his story Greg, but I definitely know his smell. You been smoking any marijuana tonight, son?"

"I don't... what... are you serious?" I stop straining as he seals the cuffs tighter.

He draws another whiff and his nose scrunches. "Yeah I'm sure I'm serious. You been smoking pot? You got any on you now?"

"No, no, of course not."

"Yeah, well what about you?" The cop looks to Dan. "You know this kid?"

"I don't... I... I mean..."

"That guy didn't do anything, officer," Akkham says. "He was on the ground the whole time. He was more scared than any of us."

The cop looks back to me.

"All right, listen up buddy. You smell like dope, you just resisted cooperation with a police officer, damn near assaulting him, and this guy's thumbed you as an accomplice to robbery. Now at the very least, we're gonna have to separate you two so we can get you calm enough for some clear answers. So I'm gonna take you down to our station while my partner stays here to sort things out."

"What? You can't do that."

"Hombre, you're already in handcuffs. At this point another word out of you is grounds for resisting arrest. If I were you I'd be rehearsing your side of the story right now. Let's go."

Though it's almost three in the morning when he takes me out to the cruiser, there are still people outside. People who watch. People who whisper to one another. People who will remember.

Numbers Game

On the scale today, staring back up at me darkly was that number
again: ninety-eight.

The plateau, the point when my body gives in and declares itself too
terribly efficient.

Every cell stretched to its frailest. I know that it can be better, be less,
and urge it thinly,

“Fight, please, oh, God, fight, you, my only friend, my mortal glove,
my dirigible of bone,

put up your feeble fists and fight against sheer chemistry. Together,
we’ll shine so bright.

Cooperation or not, you will be hacked away at, all your extraneous
flaps and flab trimmed.”

I rally, stopper my stomach with coffee, press my clothes around me
neat and trim,

suits, slim ties, sharply creased legs and stark lapel squares, worth the
eighty-eight

hundred dollars it takes to shelter the thick rolls of gristle at my side,
bright

glaring mounds of imperfection, structural weakness. Expert cut of
cloth efficiently

skimming my silhouette down to the bare structure of my bones,
nothing but that evolutionarily elegant skeleton, light passing
through, airy and thin.

On the bus, rattling along, the winter sunlight thinly
pouring onto sleepy faces, I feel the claw of hunger trim
away at lingering dreams. The chill sinks down to my bones
through gossamer skin and slipping up seventy-eighth
street, it’s emptiness that fuels my body’s fierce efficiency,
my body clutching desperately to life, euphoria, fever-bright.

I feel at times myself whiting out, bright
famine snapping at my heels, his thin
fair face eclipsing approaching death, efficient

specter of consequence. How long can my trim
legs run, and on so little as sixty-eight
calories a meal? Clutching ever-closer, his fingers bone.

I worry that my bones
will collapse in bright
sparks of pain. Fifty-eight
swims before me, inked thin,
ugly bulbous number. Try to trim
it to slender ones, solidly efficient.

Cherished, efficient
bone.

Rise, try to trim
your bright,
spindle-thin
spine to forty-eight.

Soon the binge will pour itself onto you, body hungrily grasping
for efficiency, for functionality, the barrel of your belly distended,
swelled, senses twanging raw, brightly

spurring the shuddering weight of food, sheer tremulous nutrition,
startling juice on your bones, heaving, gross spools of sugar
unwinding unbinding in your veins, in your thinness,

ruining all your work. But even as you slip into losing, into gaining,
there's the trim, calm center in you that knows it can't ensnare you for
long. For now, you're here at ninety eight.

The Bookstore

You have three choices. Three paths, three doors, whatever, you can pick the metaphor. I can't tell you what they are; I can't tell you what will happen. Hell, I don't know what will happen. The point is, you gotta choose. So which will it be? Alright, good choice. No, I don't actually know that it's a good choice; no, I told you, I don't know what will happen; yes I know I said that; I was just being polite. Just let it go. Good. Now take a deep breath and close your eyes. Good. There is a door in front of you. Reach out and grab it. Good. The handle in your hand is warm, as though someone was here before you. The faded flower pattern around the frame seems out of a movie you saw a long time ago, the title on the tip of your tongue but before you can think what it is you are through.

You're in a bookstore; it's not important which one. It could be any bookstore, anywhere. Smell the tangy bite of the coffee brewing in the café. Listen to the light chatter of all the people browsing through the clearance section. Look how happy that woman is. She just found a cookbook on sale for \$3.99. Her husband doesn't look too happy though. I guess gluten free dieting isn't his cup of tea. Hell, he probably doesn't even drink tea. He's more of a Pepsi man, I'd say.

Oh look, there you are. Cute tights, I like the floral pattern. Very bold. Are you bold do you think? Courageous? Brave? Well, I guess we're going to find out soon. No, I didn't say that, I wasn't implying, no, never mind. I like your pigtails. Very spunky.

You're walking now, free of caring mother's arms. Going to go look for a new adventure hidden deep within the pages of a book. Which will you choose? Soaring dragon fights, or backstabbing pre-teen fights that are always crammed between hot pink covers? Or perhaps a classic tale? After all, no time like the present to get caught up on that back-to-school reading. Why don't you surprise us? Which juicy lines will you devour next? I love the way you caress the spines with care, lapping up titles with shining eyes. I used to be that way back before the TV beast and internet revelation stole my soul. Back when books could save your soul. But they're empty now for me. I

can't remember why I used to bother. I hope it's not too late for you.

You're standing now, looking so intently at the pages before you that you don't even notice the man as he brushes past you, knocking into your right elbow, spilling unread pages onto the ground. You didn't even get to see what page you were on. You bend down to retrieve it when you notice a penny lying tails up on the floor. You don't believe in luck, so you pick it up and stick it in your skirt pocket, letting the cold copper brush against the cotton warmth. Standing up again you flip pages until you've found your place. Eyes scanning horizontally, you think...

Okay, I don't mean to be rude, but this is boring. Seriously, what kind of story is this? There's no hook, no catch, no action, and not even the slightest slice of drama. I like you and all, really I do, but I don't want to spend eight more pages watching you read. I could be doing better things like mowing my lawn or watching TV, or finding someone else's mind to invade. So you agree? You don't like what's behind this door too? Okay, well close your eyes again. I want you to reach out your hand, feel that door knob in your palm. Good. Now on the count of three you're going to pull it shut as tightly as you can. Ready? One. Two. Three! Nicely done. Now, rotate a little, that's it, not too far now. Do you see another door? No, okay, keep going. Now do you see it? Okay. Would you like to open it? Come on, put your back into it. Do you want to open it or not? See the chipped red paint; why is it chipped? Don't stop to wonder. Just turn the brass knob. That's a bit cliché, don't you think, a brass knob. Gives you a sense of security.

Look! There you are again, same tights, same smell of coffee wafting through the stacks. I'm going to fast forward a bit here. Books, clearance, unhappy dieting man, more books, whoops don't run into that lady now. Ah. Here we are. Look at you, so engrossed in that book. Which one is it? I can't read the title from back here.

Oh no, here comes that man again. Look up look up, he's going to...ouch. He hit you a lot harder this time. Oh no, he dropped all his change. It's scattered everywhere. Once that happened to me. I was trying to check out in the grocery store and I guess I had forgotten to zip up my change purse so when I pulled out my wallet, everything spilled out across the faux-marble tiles. It was extremely

embarrassing as you can imagine. Actually, you don't have to imagine it. Just look at that man. He's stuttering out an apology. His arms are full of books and there's no where to put them down. That's a lot of change down there. Oh, how nice of you. Look, you've stooped down to pick up all those pennies for him. You have a handful already. It's weird though. Why isn't he helping you? I mean, it's his change, you'd think he'd...

Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god he put his hand over your mouth, his other arm is around your waist. He's picking you up. What are you doing? Struggle, yell, do something! But you can't. You're frozen in place and now it's too late because he's dragging you behind the book shelves into the back of the store. Come on, do something, please. I can't help you, you have to do it. Scream, kick, struggle. But you can't. And now it's really too late because he's pushed open the bathroom door and he's pulling you through and now he's slammed you against a wall and he's pulling down your tights and his hand is rushing up your thigh and you still can't scream because you don't have control of your voice and you don't have control of your body. And you're still clenching onto that handful of pennies because it's the only thing you've got to hold on to. And now he's unzipping his jeans and your white underpants are around your knees and he has started to thrust and to push and now you're screaming and crying like a brand new baby...

What? You say you want this to stop? But you chose this door, you pushed it open. You wanted it. You wanted adventure and now you have it. Fine, fine, we can stop. Close your eyes again. But this is the last door. Once you've opened it you can't go back. Are you willing to take that risk? Whatever's behind that door could be worse. Who knows what's in store. But it's your call. Yes? You want to do it? Play, then close your eyes and pull the door shut. Easy now, don't break the door. I know you wanted that to be over but don't take it out on the poor door. That's what my mother used to say. Now that poor door, you've hurt its feelings. Did your mom ever say stuff like that? Makes you feel even worse, doesn't it.

Okay then, you know the drill. Turn until you see another door. Make sure it's not one you've already opened. We wouldn't want that now, would we? We wouldn't want to go to where we already

were because someone just wasn't happy there. Sorry. I'm ranting. It was uncalled for. I'll be nice. After all, you did just get....Okay here is the last door. Tall sheets of metal that contain some kind of future. Cold to your finger's touch. The shivers it sends are familiar, as though you have been here before. You have been here before. There you are, walking back to look at books. See how you're walking? One shoulder slumped to the side, feet dragging across flesh colored carpeting. Your hands are shoved pocket deep. Like you know. You have the weight of the world on you. How long are you going to carry that with you? Silly me. That's what we're here to find out. Like you know something's up.

Running your fingers down those spines. You haven't had your sexual awakening so this is as close to sensuality as you can get. You love the smell of the books. Old books smell like must and rain. New books smell like technology and the Atlantic Sea. It's all about the senses for you.

I see you've selected a book. You're reading the back cover, flipping through the cloudwhite pages. I can see the title now. Speak. One simple word. One impossible word. You're reading now, your back turned to the crowd, facing wooden shelves. You don't see him coming. You hear him. As pennies drop, a metal rainfall, you look up, startled from your literary world. He shifts from foot to foot as you take in his long dark hair, his unwrinkled face. You can't place his ethnicity. He is as ambiguous as the white on the page before you. His arms are filled with thick books, the kind you hope to understand one day. Their pages are cream colored, not innocent, not untouched.

He is looking down now, all the coins are scattered at your polished toes. His face is filled with confusion. He asks you for help. You put your book back on its shelf, bending down, careful to tuck your skirt behind your knees. He stands high above. Watching.

See how your face is flushing? The blood is pumping and pumping into your cheeks. It's so hot, it burns. You are ashamed. Why do you feel ashamed? Have you done something wrong? You are helping, he needed help, you only wanted to help. But why isn't he helping? You are squatting there on the floor, picking up penny by penny as time drags forward. His wallet is on the ground next to your foot and you see the change purse is unzipped. You try cramming all

the pennies in, but there are too many. How did they all fit? Why was the pocket unzipped?

He puts his books on the shelf. Next to your book. Speak. Time speeds up and his hand is clenched around your arm. You should scream, you need to scream, more than anything you want to scream. But you can't. The other day in class you learned that fear can paralyze you. In airplane crashes the passengers don't always die from the crash itself. They die because they are unable to get out of their seats. They can't move. Fear paralyzes. They give in, they can't help themselves. Fear seduces. They die. Fear wins.

You can't help yourself. He's only been holding on for three four five seconds but everything is flashing through your mind, clogging your vocal chords, choking your tongue. You should scream. But you can't. But you don't have to. A woman with a nametag is approaching, yelling, I don't know what she says, you don't care what she says. The man has let go of you. He has run, taking his coins with him. The woman, your *deus ex machina*, tells you that you will be alright, she got there in time. You will think differently in time. She leaves you, finds your mother, leaving you alone with your book once more. As you flip through page after page, not seeing the words on the stained colored lines, you see it on the ground. Shining, as though nothing had happened. You bend down to flip it heads up. It will bring luck to the next person who finds it.

Slowly inhale and exhale, feeling your cool breath on your tongue. When you feel ready, gently open your eyes. Become aware of your surroundings. See the white walls, notice the floral design of the sofa, smell the aging book pages lining the shelves. Feel the woodgrain door as you lean against it. Know that you are safe here. Know that you are safe now. Taste the copper in your mouth. The past can't find you anymore. Taste the copper in your mouth.

Pediment

Arcing, spherical, momentary, fractal,
you do not collapse into structure
when lips, having safely met in the
rigid circuitual shores of being,
arouse the angular, fertile wisdom of memory.

What meter do you breathe in?
A cacophony of synthesized breeding,
a gestating frequency too dense for thought,
bearable only in scheduled undressing, and, later,
in dilations and dilutions of great systems falling inward

from God, and you, an anonymous skeptic
fervid angel coursing to deliver us from
the architecture of the past, pulsing and linear,
and in your smallness and your accidental,
burst apart, crippling words and predicting

miracles but the erratic, misfired truth
of matter is that if I, I, I, am the columns then
you are only the pediment,
swirling pale flesh and fickle perfumes.

Home Sick

4 AM.

Ghosts hanging on trees outside windows,

heads impaled on mailboxes.

104° fever.

I'd sleep on the pull-out sofa while mother cleaned upstairs.

If I heard furniture dragging on the floor

I'd check on her, in case she was moving a chair

underneath ceiling beams in the living room.

Realize how much nursing homes

smelt so much like my own.

Wet leaves and stale casket wood,

walls lined with both.

When I become aware of these things,

I breathe out chlorine,

as if my mother had stepped off that chair,

and in her last pendulum moment

found all her swaying moved her nowhere.

Lust

You are not handsome.
A pointy, jagged cliff hangs over your lips.
Your shoulders are narrow and weak,
and your body is a short, skinny twig.
I can snap you with my teeth.
I should never want you.

Yet I look at you
and a furious beehive erupts in my stomach,
stingers stab into the ends
of my fingers and
numb my toes.

Another Saturday night,
and our eyes meet while
the thrumming bass persists
like the beating wings of dragonflies
and suddenly your fingers
have me like pincers.

I'm against your door molding,
your mouth leaving poison marks
on my neck and lips,
your hands at my sides,
crawling across my body like spiders.

You slam the door,
pull me to the bed,
sheets catching us
like a fresh woven web,
your stick figure weightless above me.

I press against your hard wooden chest,
pulling your hips to mine,
and now we've shucked

Lust

our exoskeletons, and your body
is moving with mine like
symbiosis,
and I feel brand-new,
a caterpillar sliding out of its cocoon,
only to realize that it is now
an explosion
of color, light,
and movement.

I shiver beneath your
flesh and roll over,
like a sated maggot.

Your eyes, sky-blue scarabs,
skitter across me.
In their trail
they leave rows of goosebumps
on my tender, swollen skin.

Sarah Cogswell

Sunday Morning

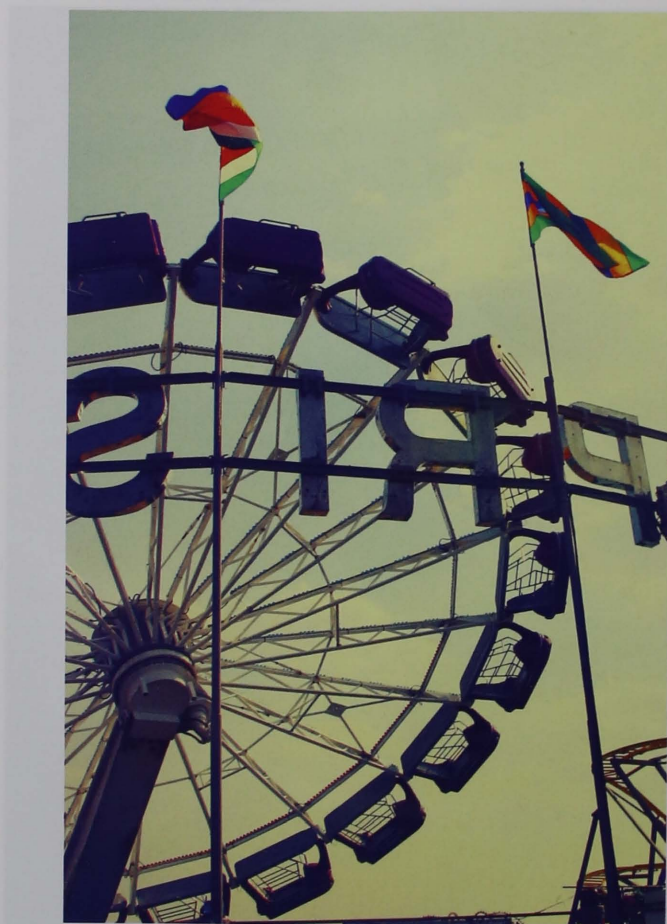
Charcoal, 11x14



Lindsay Hogan

Jersey Aesthetic

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Allison Cavanaugh

Seaweed in 306-5133 **Jump!**

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Jenny Phillips

Behind Reimert

Oil on Canvas, 18x20



Emily Dugan

Seaweed in New Zealand

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Bethani Zeller

Tombée de L'élégance

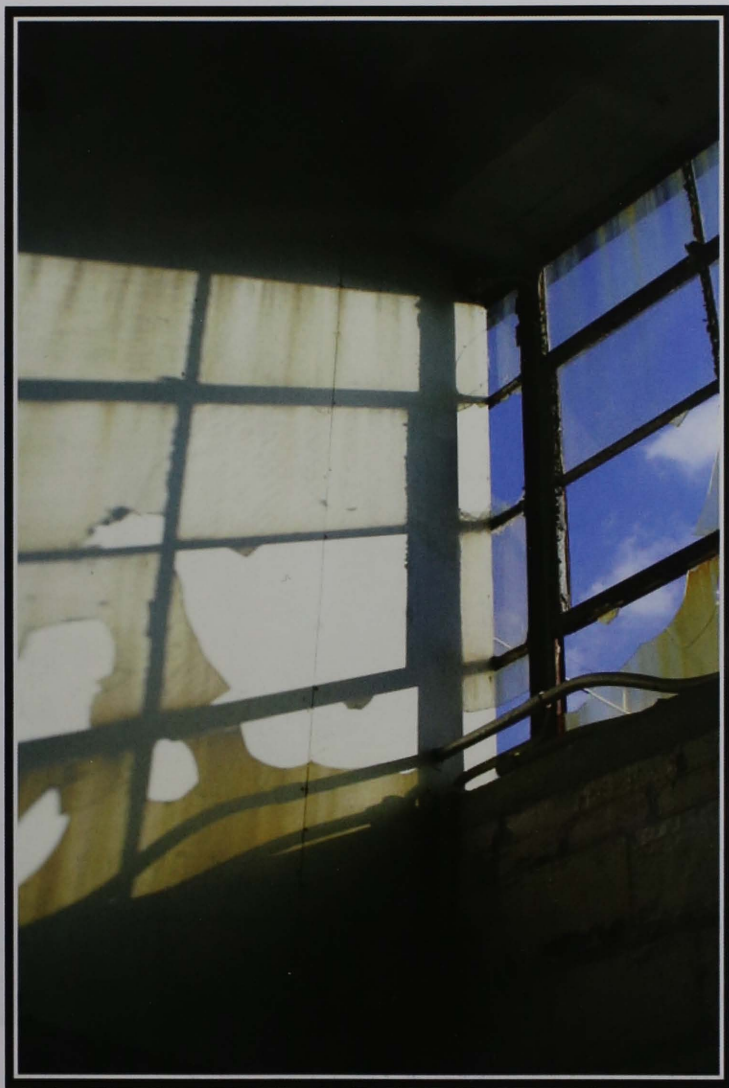
Digital Photograph, 8x12



Kaitlin Murphy

Rainbow *The Window*

Digital Photograph, 7.53x11.21



Monica Reuman

Esperando

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Kyle Davis

Rainbow to the Heavens

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Rikki Eble

Encased

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Alexandra Duch

In Springtime

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Karen Levandoski

A Fiesolan Monk's Room

Digital Photograph, 4x6



Bethani Zeller

Moments *Inside a Bone*

Digital Photograph, 8x12



Bethani Zeller

Neon Indian

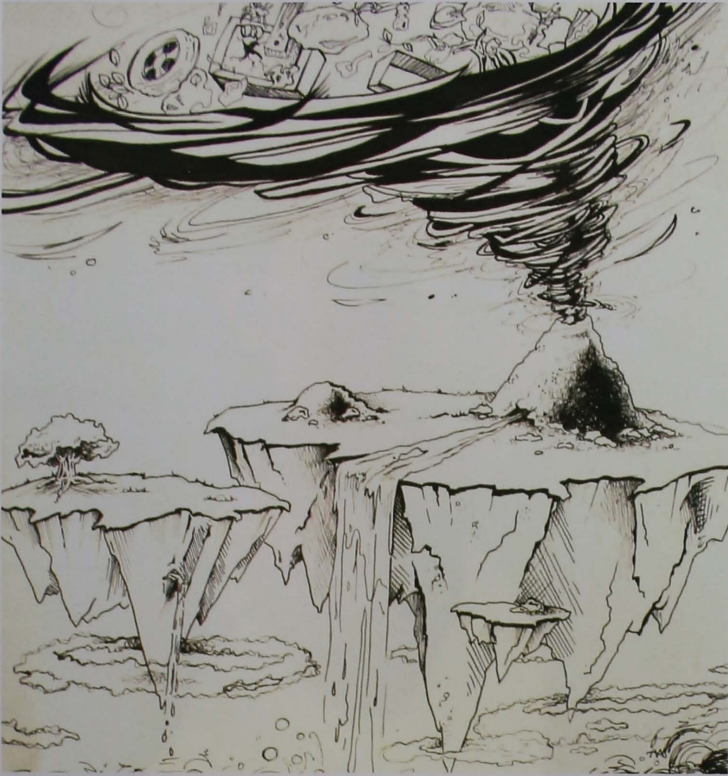
Digital Photograph, Photo Manipulation, 8x12



Liz Pavlovick

Moments of Clarity

Pen and Ink, 16x22



Monica Reuman

OneFeral: A feral self-portrait

Oil Painting, 15x17



Schemers

Mitch – 85 years old

Art – 90 years old

(Mitch and Art are alone on stage. Both men are sitting in wheelchairs. Each has a tray of food lying across the armrests so that it is stationed in front of them.)

Mitch

(Throws down his utensils in disgust)

Cardboard and rat shit!

Art

...cardboard...

Mitch

It's *all* cardboard and rat shit!

Art

(Takes up a piece of food on the end of his fork and holds it in front of his face, examining it.)

It doesn't taste *that* bad.

Mitch

No Art, it tastes that fuckin' bad. I'm a goddamn skeleton over here. Barely the strength to lift my hands! Used to be only my prick that needed help liftin'. *Now* look at me.

(slowly lifts his hands off of the tray, looks at them for a second, then places them back on the tray)

Art *(Mortified)*

You're right. We're both as good as dead. What am I going to do Art?

(in a panic)

Nurse! Nurse!

Mitch

Hey! Hey buddy! It's ok! It's ok..ok? Settle down ok pal it's gunna be alright, there's a good Art, ok?

(inches his wheelchair close enough so that he can slide his hand over onto Art's arm)

Look, the food's shit, but you ain't gunna die. The food's always shit on Monday. It'll turn round as the week goes by, you know that. You just gotta try to make the best of it ok old buddy? It's just scrambles and brot today. At least there's none of that cream corn. You remember that stuff?

Art

I remember having some...I think...

Mitch

Well I'll tell you what it tastes like. *Shit*. And I'll tell you what it looks like. It looks like *shit*! And it goes out the same way it goes in. Stuff flies through your works like a goddamn banshee, you'll be sitting here with shit in your pants before you finish the last bite.

Art

There's shit in your pants?

Mitch *(vehemently)*

No. No, Art! I'm fine.

(leans up in his chair so that Art can hear him better)

Listen, *listen*. This sucks. Remember you and me up on D. The helpings we used to get up there. You remember when we were on D, Art? With the chicken pieces and the warm soup.

Art

The soup was very warm...

Mitch

It wasn't warm. That soup was *hot*. Remember how the steam would rise off that sucker. The way you used to laugh when it would fog up my glasses? And that nice little colored nurse who use to come over

and pat your back and wipe your face when you spit up on yourself?

Art

Her hands were so soft...

Mitch

They *were* soft, Art. They *were* soft. Then they had to go bring in this new crew. "You're gunna go on a little trip," they told us. "Have to make room for some new friends," they said. Bring us down here to F, have us look out these port holes for windows and start feeding us this fuckin' *shit*.

Art

I remember those new friends...

Mitch

New friends my dick. 60 year old fucks is what they are. Have so much money then can retire while they're still goddamn kids, and too fuckin' lazy to look after themselves, so they take a nice ride up here and they're on a permanent vacation.

Art

I remember vacation...

Mitch

That's what we need Art. A fuckin' vacation. You remember Little Tommy? Used to play backgammon with me on Tuesdays? Little Tommy had himself a nice vacation. His youngsters came up here two days after that big move and took him 'cross town to *Sunny Streams*. You know what I hear them saying about *Sunny Streams*? I hear they got *steak*. Real *steak*, Art. They cut it up for you real nice and thin and give you some of those false chompers so you can chew the thing yourself.

Art

I loved chewing...

Mitch

I loved chewing too Art. I loved to feel that meat pull right apart in your mouth. They way it was always soaking wet. The flavor was just so...so goddamn...*bold!*

Art

I want some steak Mitch... I want to chew and eat steak and take warm baths again.

Mitch

I do too, old buddy; I do too. But you and me, we're stuck here on this shit fuckin' floor with this shit fuckin' food. We got nurses who, with their heads so far up their own asses, you can sit here hollerin' at them like some sort of blabbering idiot and they don't even stir. These people don't care about us, Art. They don't give a *fuck* about whether we're happy or not. They just have to make sure that we don't kick the bucket in broad daylight, and make sure our trousers ain't full of *shit*.

Art

But my trousers *are* full of shit Mitch.

Mitch

So are mine, Art; so are mine...

Art

What are we going to do Mitch?

Mitch

We're gunna get the fuck out of this place, that's what we're gunna do.

Art

Leave the floor?

Mitch

That's right. Leave the fuckin' floor. Wheel right down that hall and

out that white door. Take the elevator down to the bottom and wheel right the fuck out of here. Before he left, Little Tommy told me there's a bus right at the end of this here block that takes you right over to *Sunny Streams*.

Art

So you want to do it? You really want to *leave*?

Mitch

Aw, hell, I donno, Art, I was just bullshittin' with you. I mean... sure I'd wanna leave. But... I mean... only if you wanna leave too...

Art

I don't know... wouldn't it be hard?

Mitch

Hard? Hard? Fuck no! It'd be the easiest thing you'd ever done. You just wait till little miss tits comes by in the morning to clean your pan and snatch her card out of her side pocket when she bends down. Then we just wait till they lock up for the night and roll right fuckin' out.

Art

The easiest thing I've ever done? Me? I don't want to do it, Mitch. I'm too afraid! Why can't you do it?

Mitch

I'm too big a target, Mitch, you know that. I'm the one always making the fuss, complaining about shit. I'm always the one they catch staring at their tits or smackin' them on the ass. I'm the first person they would guess took that card. They'd never think to check you.

Art

I don't know Mitch. I would really have to think about it? When would you want to do this?

Mitch

Tomorrow. It's gotta be tomorrow.

Art

Tomorrow? Why tomorrow?

Mitch

Cuz tomorrow's Tuesday. We leave tomorrow night. They always come in late Wednesday morning so that will give us plenty of time to get 'cross town before anyone gets wise.

Art

I don't know about this.

Mitch

Don't worry Art. It's a foolproof plan. Worst come to worst, she catches you stealing her card, or they catch us sneaking out, and we fake dementia. You start hollering like I know you can, I'll start carrying on and on about some war story or one time back when I played baseball, we both shit ourselves and they wheel us right back here.

Art

That's a good plan Mitch. Ok, I'll do it.

(BLACKOUT)

Sand Lining Instructions (Instrucciones de Arena Revestimiento)

Crack open my skull, would you.
Bash it against the counter like a block of ice.
Grey matter does not wait to greet you on the inside.
You will find, rather, a lining of sand.
Play with it between your hands.
Observe how it weighs the head down,
With the effect of a slight forward slump.

Snap my rib cage in half, then into smaller pieces.
Treat it like long sticks being prepped for a fire.
See my heart, beating and seemingly healthy.
Then be hit by this putrid smell.
The stench of dishes left in the sink for weeks.
Crinkle your nose and peel back the layers.
You cannot resist.
Discover that it is oozing and rotting from the inside.

I close my eyes for you,
This allows you to see what I feel:
The little bugs that crawl on my face.
You are afraid now.
In the darkness they glow,
Picking away at the flecks of dry skin.
One at a time, one at a time
like deranged Pac-men.

Keep going.
You breathe faster now.
Spread my legs.
Don't stop now.
Between them lie discolored folds of scars.
Scars that leak red rum, red ruM.
redruM.
It was he who said, "All work and no play."

Madeline Constantino

Now rip out my spine.
You could not wrangle it free on the first try.
Try again.
Don't mind me.
Gaze at the pieces of vertebrae.
Rough strands of braided twine.
That fall limp in your hands.
They were sewn together by angry faces.

Wring out my fingers,
Which are a series of wet towels.
Unravel the five knotted vines underneath.
Listen closely.
Be startled by the hiss.
Stresss, Anxshushhh.
Their panicked whisper.

...
All this you would find,
My dear brave one.
That is of course, if you cared to look.
Now remove your glasses,
Wipe your brow.
You have all that is needed to make the decision.

Lacks sufficient light for a picture.
Not worth documenting or archiving.
Commit to memory?
There is no need.
Just sand and lines
Between the body and her mind.
Now leave.

But wait until I'm not looking, would you.
First get up, then turn around, then walk away.
Close the door, and hit the lights on your way out.
Drive further and further in your car.
Pull into the gravel lot.
That's it, there there child, you've done well.

So bottoms up.
Here's to you.

Now forget.
Please come back.
Wait. Don't.
Pleeease come back.
Already, forgotten already.
Sand is hard to hold for long,
I knew all along. Now you know.

A-A-Ask a Question

I don't know what you're going through
(and I won't if you don't tell me)
What kind of keypad "let's take a break"
Or shattered-vase home-sweet-spice life
Or God-hates-you-garbage gets chalked
In your head
But if you're scared to share 'cause you think I'll
Sling-shot profane or think twice blink in silence
'Cause you think I'll
judge you or I won't understand,
I might not understand.
But I won't judge you.
'Cause I've been
down slick-drippy fixes
in my mind and now I can only judge myself.

And if you think God will strike you down
for asking a question
Did you ever think he could be waiting
for you to ask?
Opening crisp sky-diving butterflies?
'Cause if you never ask questions
you never get answers,

And there are some answers you
should be afraid
not to know
'Cause God might strike you down someday –
because you didn't ask a question.

The Opposite of Serendipity

Beep...Beep...Beep. It could almost be considered never-ending. *We were only a day away.* I shouldn't think ahead of myself, but I can't help it. After all, thoughts exist in a realm ungoverned by time. They multiply more rapidly than sperm.

My dad lies helplessly stiff in that cold bed.

"Thanks for being here with me."

I don't respond, partly because I'd feel selfish if I did...like I was earlier in the day, lifting weights to replace my self-esteem with ego...ignoring my mom's "urgent" text messages. She never has anything important to say anyway.

My father's advice regarding all facets of life started pouring into my imagination like a tsunami of brain waves. *Don't fret about the little things; life is too short. Move on, tomorrow is a new day.* My mind jolts me back to high school, to 11th grade, forcing me to re-envision applying my pretend studiousness and coercive ability to skip out on class, showing up 15 minutes late to a one-hour-long class to pop leftover hydrocodone from the kitchen cabinet in the bathroom, leaving each particle of my being wondering who made the air in this school feel so god damned delicious.

"Where were you?" one of my teachers asks.

"I got lost," ninety-nine days into the school year. A chuckle and a smile, from both parties. I sat down in the middle of the cool kids, behind the hot girl, and next to the other two hot girls. They liked me because, as I liked to say to myself in the mirror before school just after popping one of six pills in total for the day, "I don't give a fuuuuuck." But it was okay. Because it was true.

It worked for me. I wish it still could, but then again, I'm wishing for a lot of things right now. I receive another text. *Are you okay?!? Would you like me to bring you something?* Really? Sweet thought, but no, thanks; I don't think my aunts and uncles, who are exhaustedly sitting in the waiting room just steps away from their dying older brother, would appreciate my soon-ended fling of a slut strutting through this wing of the hospital. I do wish my sisters were here though. Well, I do and I don't. Their combined ages barely total mine; they couldn't handle this, let alone understand it-- though my

heart has never actually been on my sleeve; it is kept inside, right where it should be. Guess who I learned that from.

Alex Virgo. She started it all. She took it all, then came back for seconds, moved on to another buffet table, ate until her vagina was content, then puked it all over you until you got the hint, which you never did. No wonder she was only 95 pounds. Soccer season began that fall, and each afternoon, the junior class ruled the school. Our football team blew anyhow. I never cared much for popularity... until this year. I noticed my talent, and especially noticed who was noticing my talent. Alex Virgo. She was new, kind of, and popular, of course. She could best be described as a freshly decorated, 80-year-old trampoline: easy to use, loud as shit, and in constant need of repair. It was good to look at, and hey, everyone knew when you had a trampoline. So I banged my new-used trampoline on our second date. The popularity transformation was complete. I was now the butterfly with the sweetest nectar.

Would someone turn these fucking machines off? The beeping won't stop, but I guess that's a good thing – so long as it was constant, so long as it *was*.

"When are the girls coming?" I asked, waiting hastily for results.

"The earliest flight they can get is in the morning." I don't think we have until morning.

I have three sisters, all of them younger, all three visiting my mom's sister in Florida. Our mom thought it necessary to send them on vacation to get away from the hassles of standing idly by as pain whiskered around my father's brainstem in the form of injections, radiation, and overly populated cancerous cells parasitically manipulating their way through the bloodstream, traveling at a speed equivalent to light. Dad didn't have much of a say. He wasn't himself since the tiny man with the even tinier hands performed the miracle surgery. *The largest brain tumor he's ever removed.* The words echoed with the vividness and eerie clarity of a High Def-Surround Sound TV on Machine Growth Hormone. We had almost won. I can't believe we're not going to win. I don't believe it.

"Why don't you go grab something to eat, dear?"

Because I'm not hungry, that's why. "Okay, mom. Do you

want anything?" She was still my mom.

"No, I'm okay, thanks." Then a short silence, not so much awkward as it is necessary. "Thanks for being here with me," she repeated.

And again, I can't find a response suited for the occasion. I walk down into the lobby, two of my dad's brothers following me like personal bodyguards. They aren't helping much, but at least they're here. I acted tough, just like men are supposed to. It didn't matter who was watching, it mattered who was judging. They all were. We walk into the cramped vending-machine area, scouring for a meal that could somehow satisfy an already tasteless night. I find a burger. It reeks of processed cheese, but its only flavor is the desolation that makes up the tears which slalom down the outer edges of my cheekbones and onto the bare bun.

Protocol is only operated on when the ones outside of your immediate family are around, the ones that can go tell the other ones, the ones that will never harp on your faults until *you* aren't around and then have a good, unhealthy laugh at your expense, or maybe their own. Protocol? Not in my household. I understood why my dad wanted to leave, like he did those nights in my first house after a ceremonial shouting match ensued between him and my mother. I was never really scared until things were thrown. Doors slammed, no problem. Fuck yous, yawn. Glass thrown? Oh shit, this could be a problem.

I can remember the time my dad moved out. He lived across town, for about several months. There was a certain independence I felt when visiting him. I knew it was my fault he was there and not at home because that's what I was told. But I loved guy's night. We ordered pizza, played *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on Nintendo, and talked about everything fun in life: sports and women. "You know this wasn't your mother's fault," he would say, sensing my emotional detachment from her. "I know," I would reply. I never knew. Mom was always crying when she dropped me off there. I became her spy, required to tell him my mom wants him home, and that I want him home. Or was it that I wanted to be *there*? I couldn't resent him—he deserved appreciation—he deserved someone else.

And here I am, terrified of the thought of no longer having

him around, terrified more so of *her...always...being around*. I'll have no shield, no protector. Sure, I love her. But this is *her* fault. No man at forty-seven should be in his position, his parents waiting their turn to cry at his bedside, again, instead of in the satirically-termed waiting room. *She* put him here. Her yelling, her cursing. I don't doubt they had a good time when they were young, but fun had left a long time ago. I think we left our fun in the hospital that day in '95; my mom birthed a baby girl in its place.

I step off the elevator, and back into the room. Dad looks cold. It's hard to stare for more than a few seconds – so I don't. I mosey by his foot side, over to the open chair next to my mom, who is covered in a large warm-looking cotton blanket. It's quite cold on this side of the room. I wake her up, asking whether or not she is keeping in touch with my sisters, foreseeing another wrong response. She says she is, then adds that they aren't to be told of the urgency of the situation until morning. It has to wait until morning. Please, God, wait until morning.

I wish that's how I really felt, but I know what's best for him. I know he can't handle the pain much longer, even though the nurse repeatedly tells me and my mom he's experiencing none. *Aside from the last six months, that is*. After the miracle surgery, yet another tumor was found, in his lymph node. He was diagnosed with a completely separate cancerous 'event.' The doctor called it throat cancer. Brain cancer *and* throat cancer? And yet, in this room my own dad is being held due to the fifth time he caught pneumonia during his treatments. Five.

The last time I spoke to him was this morning. He was brought in for fluids, a nearly weekly routine at this point. But we were still all smiles, conversing and joking as we always would. My dad liked to downplay his pain; he didn't like others to feel uncomfortable on account of his condition. Not only that, but tomorrow was going to be his last day of radiation, his last day. I had work, and then, like usual, an intense workout at the newly renovated LA Fitness just up the street from our house. It was almost 9:30 in the morning, and although I wanted to call out of work, my mom wouldn't allow it. "You need that money," she would say. I kissed my dad on the forehead, but forgot this time to tell him I love him;

instead: "I'll talk to you later."

The nurse walks in, a man of my stature, but has a surprising number of tattoos up and down his neck and arms. An entire sleeve on his left arm is dedicated to a scene where an angel is ironically sitting, looking upward at the sky, or the heavens, or both, as if to appeal to greater authority. His words are uneven, toppling over one another like a dominoes set made up of graham crackers and chess pieces. My father's brain is imploding, he explains. The pneumonia, alongside the help of the chemotherapy drugs and radiation that was typically concentrated at the back of his head, directly behind his nose, has destroyed his immune system to an astonishingly fatal level. He is trying to fight, but the fight is rigged, the victor predetermined.

"Even if he does live, it will be a very unpleasant life. He may have no motor skills at all, and his personality may be drastically altered."

It's time to let go. The nurse leaves the room, upon my mother's request. She backs off when I ask her for a few minutes alone. I begin to speak, quivering in a simultaneously hot and cold sweat.

"I love you dad. So much." My tears and sinuses are turning my speech disorderly and wobbly.

"You put up a good fight, dad. Mom and I are here for you. But it's time you did what's best for you. I can't watch you torture yourself anymore. You did good, I'm proud of you."

My mom can't hear me, but I can hear her low, moan-like sulking in the background, giving way to an even heavier tear in my own ducts.

"Just let go. I'll take care of your family; I'll make sure they're..."

"Tell him to come back, tell him not to leave me. I can't live alone!" my mother interrupts.

And I lose it.

"Fuck you, mom!" The elevated tenor of my own voice startles me briefly. "Everything's always about you, you stupid bitch. My father's dying right now, *your* husband! And you're more fucking concerned about yourself! Your three daughters aren't even fucking here! They don't even know!" I emphasize and slightly pause after

each “fuck,” leaning on it in hopes of finding more things to yell about. I have too much to say. But not here, not now.

“Why are you yell—”

I can’t hold back. “*Me?* You think this is about *me?* You’re such a piece of shit. You never cared about this family. You never cared about him!”

Her weeping turns a violent crimson.

“*You* are the problem, mom. You!” “*You* drove him to leave you years ago, and now *you* drove him to leave us.”

I suddenly get the feeling of future regret, of soon having the tail-between-my-legs syndrome—but I say it anyway. “I wish *you* were the one in that fu...”

The sound of flatlining finishes my thought. My mind goes numb. The scene I once knew as reality becomes a series of black and white images, and blurry, selectively playing seconds apart from one another as if my mind is creating a disturbing flipbook to torment my soul. I can feel the lobes of my brain ripping themselves from the stem and chaotically collapsing back down in disarray. The tattooed nurse shocked him...once...twice. “Clear...Clear.” I stand motionless. My brain and my eyes are competing for which images they want me to see. A third shock. My father’s body jolts from the bed again. A fourth. The beefy arms of the tattooed nurse are in constant motion, but I see his angel, still sitting, waiting—mockingly, yet serenely. The nurse shocks him a fifth time. I know it’s not possible, but a tiny tear wells up just under my dad’s left eye. Doctors say hearing is the last to go.

Flash Cards

Plastered to this seat, forced
To relearn things I
Never learned well enough.
Flashing pink, lined cards,
I never flashed long enough.

Plastered to this seat, in this
Unfortunate cubicle where
Chip guy always finds me.
Always sits right behind me.

Chomping. Always chewing his
Chips. Always crunch, crunch, crunching
His cheddar chips between
Chapped lips. Putting so much
Effort into chewing, degrading
That chip into fine morsels before
He swallows. Go ahead, keep chewing, chip guy.

He should afford me new head phones,
Because his chewing is seeping through the
Soul of the music I'm blasting to drown
Out the chomping of chip guy. Go ahead,
Keep chewing, chip guy. If you choke
On your chip, I'm not giving you the Heimlich.

Trapped like a picture
Plastered in place, stuck
In a frame left behind
On a dull white wall,
In a library only inhabited
During finals week, in front of two
Bookshelves of decaying yellow –
Paged, leather bounds. Lonely
From never being picked up,

Like the baby that cried too much.

I'm flashing my cards, flashing them
Long enough, so I can earn a grade superior enough,
So I can be accepted into Med school soon enough,
And in enters soda girl, with her Diet Pepsi Zero.

Slurping that slosh through a straw and I just
Want to say, hey soda girl that sugar infused
Shit your slurping is going to rot that decaying smile
Right off your puckered little face if you keep slurping
It down. Who says you could not drown in that container
Of low-cal chemical concoction? If that sugary syrup saturated
Solvent takes you under, I'm not throwing you a life vest.

And then I thought that chip guy and soda girl
Should get together in a carbohydrate cabana
And they could chomp on chips and slurp
Soda and they could have little babies
That chew on chips and suck soda from a bottle.
And then those cute little chip chewing, soda swallowing
Babies would all grow up to be Diabetics.

Columbus Day

One poem a day the word spreads
Dragonflies and a shimmering surface
I don't know about beats and syllables and meter
he said you probably unintentionally
put all these stressed beats on the same line
I thought
I was just mad

mad mad mad a mad girl's love song these
thoughts. They brought their smoky topaz
ships and steel tobacco cocaine and influenza
along with their love of God across the Atlantic
burnt wood, stars and no
punctuation. They wanted to smear
their love of God on everyone they saw
and kill with it, stabbing
blood spurting from the wounds of
the heathens
gaping at all that blood
maybe he thought, that's not what's inside me
all that blood
I have thoughts inside of me.
I have Jesus inside of me.

And now the boy wearing the folded collar
always knows the answers to the questions in class
always knows about the current events
We wound each other
I think, much like they did.
Derived from what evidence? I rip off
my silly scabs and I want to be
in his warm current events reading orbit
This is the first poem (as we realize how precarious we are
as we realize that sometimes poets

Sara Sherr

aren't meant to be poets) tears of relief,
yes, happiness is out there
For this boy who gets it every day
on CNN.com

Basketball doesn't belong in a poem
but the girls who scooped sugar
do. I wanted to play basketball because I felt like
(and it was) the one true layer of the universe.
In basketball I was sure
more than a lonely kid
who seemed to think more than everyone else
and who had to explain to the principal
why I was the only girl
at the boys' table in the lunchroom.

I said
We are all asking for it.
But in my head. I never wanted
to get in trouble.

The Human Doll

“**T**his procedure will only take about forty-five minutes,” the man announced, his huge, toothy grin leering at her strapped to the dentist-like reclining chair. The overhead lights bathed the dank, dirty cellar in a sick glow. With every breath, the smell of mold invaded her nostrils. A strangled sob escaped her as her eyes darted anxiously to the small worktable; her head was also fastened to the chair. The man’s fingers caressed a carving knife before his attention turned to a needle and thread. White glass balls rested beside the thread and beside those lay what appeared to be a blonde wig. The man delicately picked up the needle, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. He picked up the thread. Black thread.

“Wha—what are you gonna do to me?” she whimpered.

“It might hurt for a little while, but you’ll be just perfect,” the man continued eagerly as if he hadn’t heard her. His dark eyes gleamed in excitement. The woman struggled against the restraints on her arms and legs, but they wouldn’t give. She screamed for help but didn’t really expect anyone to come. She was alone with this crazed man, and she was terrified.

“What’s your name, honey?” he asked, moving to her side as he knotted the thread, wet it, and then slipped it through the eye of the needle. He looked up and grinned at her. She trembled.

“M-Maria,” she managed. Her heart slammed against her ribcage, and the blood pounded in her ears.

“Maria. What a pretty name!” the man flattered. His grotesque smile seemed to widen.

“What do you want? Please just let me go. I won’t tell anyone, I promise. I don’t even know where I am,” Maria begged, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Maria. I can’t do that. My daughter picked you, you see,” he replied, chuckling. “Kids will be kids.”

“But—”

“Well, it’s time to start. Like I said, this will only hurt for a little while, and then you’ll be ready,” he gushed, big white teeth beaming. Maria’s skin crawled as if infested with thousands of tiny

insects.

Before Maria could say another word, the man plunged the needle into her tender upper lip. She screamed. The man pushed the thread into her lower lip, and then yanked the rest of the thread through with a swift jerk of his wrist. Maria let loose a wild wail of terror and pain as blood trickled down her chin. Her teeth chattered.

"No!" Maria managed to protest, the right side of her lip swollen and sore already. The man slapped her across the face.

"Be still. We wouldn't want me to make a wrong move, now would we?" the man quipped cheerily. His eyes bulged maniacally from their sockets as he smiled down at her. Maria forced herself to breathe, forced away the nausea that threatened to break free. The man continued sewing with horrifying precision; *prick, pierce, pull*. She moaned. The man hummed cheerfully as he worked. Something desperate and panicked lurched inside Maria with every needle puncture. Her throbbing, bleeding lips were sewn together in a matter of minutes. She was forced to breathe through her nose. The man snipped the end of the thread with a small pair of scissors from the worktable. The metallic taste of blood dripped down the back of Maria's throat. Her face was sticky with blood, tears, and sweat.

While Maria focused on swallowing her queasiness, the man had already switched utensils. He now wielded the carving knife. She whimpered in desperation and horror. The last thing she saw was the carving knife speeding towards her face. There was a sick, wet sound as the man dug the knife into her left eye and then excruciating pain exploded in her head. Blood surged from her eye socket as Maria gave a muffled scream trapped behind sewn lips. The man dug out her left eye, severed the nerves, and plopped the eye on the worktable. Maria could feel the slimy contents of her eye socket sliding down her cheek. She felt nauseous and light-headed as the pain ripped through her. She gagged and shivered uncontrollably. The man proceeded to her right eye.

Maria's muffled shrieks filled the room with misery and pain and fear. Her world went black as her other eye was ripped mercilessly from her body. He had taken her sight. *She was blind*. She moaned and cried out in protest. The next thing she knew, a smooth solid object was shoved into the empty holes in her face. The glass

balls from the worktable. *Not balls. Eyes. Glass eyes.*

Panic escalated into hysteria. Maria cried and kicked and pulled at her restraints. It was becoming harder to breathe; her nose was clogged with eye-blood and snot. Her back felt matted with sweat. Her entire body shuddered in shock. She thought she was dying. She wanted to die. *Her eyes. He took her eyes.*

Just before she lost consciousness, she felt sharp jabs of pain along her hairline. The light, scratchy feel of artificial hair rested on her collarbone.

“Oh, Daddy! She’s perfect!” the little girl gushed, her blonde pigtails bouncing. She clapped her hands together and squealed in delight.

“I’m so glad you like her, angel!” her father replied, grinning.

“Oh, Charles! You’ve outdone yourself!” her mother praised.

Charles led Maria to the seat across from his daughter. He pulled out the chair and guided the lifeless woman into it.

“Do you want some tea, Mommy?”

“Yes, of course, Anne!”

Anne lifted the pink plastic teapot and poured it into a matching pink teacup in front of her mother.

“What’s her name?” Anne asked as her father turned to leave the dining room.

“She’s called Maria, but you can rename her if you’d like, angel.” His eyes lit up as he spoke, and his voice sounded agonizingly cheerful.

“I don’t like that name. I’ll call her... Susie!” Anne exclaimed, turning her attention back to the horrid human doll before her.

“I’m going to go clean up downstairs. Call me if you two need anything,” Charles said, turning and heading into the basement. “I love you, Anne.”

“I love you, too, Daddy.” Anne’s mother pressed her hands to her bosom and smiled approvingly.

“Ask Susie if she’d like some tea,” her mother suggested after Charles had disappeared into the basement. She lifted her own teacup to her mouth and sipped.

“Susie, do you want some tea?” Anne asked politely.

Susie stared blankly at her with the glassy blue eyes. The puckered black mangle of mouth did not so much as twitch. The only indicator that Susie was still alive was the slight rise and fall of her chest.

“Great! Can you pass me your cup?” Anne requested cheerily. Susie didn’t move.

“Pass me your cup,” Anne said, the cheerfulness slipping from her tone.

Susie didn’t move. The angelic countenance of the little girl distorted into pure rage.

“Mommy, make her pass me her cup!” Anne screamed, pounding her small fists on the table. The cups, saucers, and tray of finger sandwiches jumped.

Her mother gave Susie a reproachful look.

“Now Susie, be a good little dolly and hand your cup over to Anne.”

Susie didn’t move.

Anne’s mother delicately set her teacup on her saucer before rising from her chair and striding into the kitchen. She returned with a large, gleaming knife. A malicious fire burned in her eyes. Anne smirked at Susie triumphantly.

“If you do not play with my daughter and do as she says, I will cut you with this knife. Do you understand?” her mother reproached.

Susie breathed and stared vacantly ahead.

Anne’s mother looked aghast at this insolent response. Her flawlessly-made-up face fell into the same rage that had twisted her daughter’s only moments earlier. She gritted her teeth.

“Very well,” she said coolly.

Marching over to Susie, Anne’s mother slashed a long gouge from her forearm to her wrist. Blood dripped from the wound. Still Susie didn’t move; she hadn’t even flinched.

“Now pass. Anne. Your. Cup,” Anne’s mother ordered through clenched teeth. Susie stared. Nobody moved.

“Mommy, WHY WON’T SHE PLAY WITH ME?!” Anne shrieked indignantly.

Letting out a wild cry of anger, Anne’s mother slapped Susie

across the face. The doll fell with a thud to the floor. The table setting bounced. A small, indistinct moan passed the doll's sewn, swollen black lips. The staples holding the crude blonde wig in place pulled at the hairline.

"Oh, I'll get her to play with you, my darling. Don't you worry," Anne's mother insisted. "In the end, we always get them to play, don't we?"

"Yes, Mommy," Anne affirmed, her rage subsiding. She sat back down and poured herself some tea. Charles came running up the basement steps and flung open the door.

"What on earth is going on up here?" he asked, walking into the room with a stained rag in one hand.

"Susie won't play tea party with me, and Mommy is trying to make her," Anne explained huffily. She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted.

"Did you threaten to cut her?" Charles asked his wife.

"Yes! She wouldn't cooperate!"

"And then *did* you cut her?"

"Yes, I did! She fell on the floor now, and still won't play! Oh, Charles, do something!"

"Daddy, I don't like this one anymore," Anne piped up, frowning. There was a moment's awkward silence as the parents processed their daughter's abrupt announcement.

"Are you done with her then? We only just got her for you, angel."

"She's not a good doll. She's bad. I want a new one. I want one now!" Anne demanded, glaring at her mother and father. Charles and Anne's mother exchanged glances.

"If that's what you really want, darling," her mother conceded.

"Yes, it is! I want a new doll! A better, prettier one! Oh, please, Mommy!" Anne begged.

"Alright, Anne," Charles said. He walked around the table to the place where Anne's rejected doll lay frozen on the floor. Flipping her over onto her back, the glassy blue eyes gazed up at him with grotesque blankness. Charles scooped her up and headed downstairs to do away with her. She never made a sound.

"So what kind of doll do you want now?" Charles asked sweetly after he had returned from the basement.

"She's got to be really pretty. And good at playing dress-up and tea party," Anne said thoughtfully. She reached across the table for a finger sandwich.

"Tall or short, darling?" her mother asked. Anne pondered her question for a moment as she finished off the finger sandwich.

Anne's eyes suddenly lit up with childish excitement.

"You know what would be the perfect doll?" she asked eagerly.

"What?" her mother and father asked simultaneously.

"Mommy!" the little girl exclaimed.

Anne's mother turned sheet white as all the blood drained from her face.

"Wha—what do you mean, Anne?" she stammered nervously, offering her a wide, shaky smile.

"You already know how to play tea party, and we already play dress-up all the time. I wouldn't have to teach you. You're so pretty, Mommy. You're perfect!"

Anne's mother stood up from her chair so quickly that she knocked it over. Her eyes darted nervously from her husband to her daughter. She shook her head.

"No, Anne. Please. We can get you a better dolly," she began.

"Oh, Mommy. I want you! You're the perfect dolly!" Anne giggled.

"What Daddy's little girl wants, Daddy's little girl gets," Charles cooed. Grinning, he turned to Anne's mother, who was already backing up towards the front door. She looked from Charles to her daughter before turning to flee the house.

Charles had grabbed her before her hand even touched the doorknob. Throwing her over his shoulder, he carried her into the basement, kicking, thrashing, and wailing.

The next day Anne was in her bedroom rifling through her closet. A plastic crown was perched atop her blonde curls, and she wore a Disney princess costume complete with matching shoes.

"Now what should you wear?"

Anne turned to the new doll seated on her bed.

"Oh, Mommy! You're so pretty! You're my favorite dolly ever!"

The doll didn't move. Her hairline was covered with infected red sores where the staples bit into her flesh; the blonde wig was bloody and disheveled around the frame of her face. Wrinkled black lips oozed yellow pus down her chin. The glass eyes bulged horribly from sunken sockets.

Anne emerged from her closet with a faux feather boa. She skipped over to her doll and flung the boa around its neck. The doll didn't move. Anne took a step back to survey her work before grinning in approval.

"Oh! You know what we should play with now?" Anne asked eagerly. Dropping on her hands and knees, she lifted up her sheets and reached under the bed. After groping around for a few moments, Anne dragged two stiff, decaying babies from beneath the bed. They were dressed in frilly pink one-pieces. Bones protruded from the shriveled black flesh. The small, withered lips were sewn shut and the little eye sockets stuffed with glass eyes.

Anne frowned.

"I'll have to tell Daddy to get me new baby dolls. These are old," Anne observed. She shrugged, unperturbed, and turned to her doll.

"Which one do you want to play with, Mommy? Lucy or Sarah?"

Mr. Yoest Gives His Report to the Police Officers on Wednesday Night

Admittedly, I was drunk when I was screaming about how tired I am driving of my truck outside the suburbs, and that I've always loved living on the highest level of buildings because having the liberty to jump out the window – is fucking empowering. And, admittedly, I was drunk off the smell of my wife on my clothes when I left her a message apologizing for always being late, giving the flowers to her shadow instead. In fact, every night you can find me receding into a creaking pew chair, drunk to the point where if I try to focus on the light above the kitchen table I can't tell if I'm the one spinning. I may fume loudly when I see bottles dressed in factory orange demanding that I don't take these pills and drink because what, you don't think alcohol gets lonely too? Maybe alcohol feels so alone that at 3:30 in the morning it turns the T.V. on mute in a lightless room so that through the blues on the wall it can believe it's down deep, drowning in the ocean. Some days my hands shake more than my chest and I cannot screw caps off bottles or rib cages off hearts, leaving them to slowly scab over. Every night I look in the mirror thinking it's a picture and I wonder why my wife isn't in it, praying in the next moment she'll slide into the frame and place her hand on my cheek, letting it rest there.

Anyways, that's why there might
have been a noise complaint.

You Will Make Beautiful Babies in America

“**Y**ou want to come back with the rest of us to Ghana this summer? If you pay half the plane ticket, we’ll pay for the rest.”

“Nah, I probably need to get a job this summer. I don’t have the extra money.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah; besides, you guys need someone to house-sit and take care of Bo again, right?”

“Fair enough. I’m going to talk to your dad a bit more about this summer. We still haven’t figured out which kids we’re bringing to Ghana this summer.”

“Sounds fun. Count me out.”

My mother sighed on the other end. “It’s sad; you haven’t been back to Ghana in what, five years?”

“I lost count. Anyways, I gotta get to class.”

“Bye, sweetie; love you.”

“Love you too, mom.” I snap the silver Verizon Razor shut with a satisfying click. Every summer, always the same. I briefly wonder if I should just break down and tell my family why I don’t want to go back. I stare at the pale fluorescent dorm lights dancing across the silver phone, and remember the day: the day I decided to leave Ghana forever.

I glanced down at my watch. 6:45PM. Shit. I was late. A whole string of expletives poured out of my mouth – interrupting the closest David, Nana, and I could get to making music. I sang, Nana played drums, and David had guitar. We weren’t very good, but we didn’t care. We needed a hobby because we already spent every day together, and had been running out of things to talk about. It was either that or kill each other. We were little high school freshmen; forming a band seemed like the logical and ‘cool’ thing to do. Now we met four days a week at David’s house and rehearsed for a while, then got bored and chatted or played video games. Nana always seemed to fall asleep; his dark skin, short cropped hair, and overly large head always swiveled around when he napped in David’s navy bubble chair: classic Nana. My parents were fine with

our shenanigans – if I got home before 7:00PM for dinner. Which, judging by the time, I wasn't going to. Again.

“Where the hell is my phone?”

David, with all his smiles and playboy charm, laughed and scooped a blue hunk of plastic out of his back pocket, dangling it by the grey rabbit cell-phone charm attached. I grabbed it with my left hand; with my right, I slapped him across his perfectly tan skin, lightly brushing by his spiked, medium black hair. He was half Swedish, half Philippine, and absolutely gorgeous.

David trailed behind Nana and I as we went out back to fetch David's driver to take us home. Since he wasn't there, we split up to search. I took my favorite section, the third floor game room. The room itself was filled with old arcade games from abroad that were rigged to play for free. David held all the high scores, except for Jurassic Park II, which I was rocking. I loved shooting dinosaurs. Regardless, I decided long ago David's house was really just too large to still be efficient: three floors, spacious rooms, an indoor and outdoor pool, and five guest bedrooms – not to mention the entire house, both inside and out, was themed in peach and various other warm shades that David's mother seemed to adore. The house was like a perpetual sunset. She had plans to install an intercom system into the house, but it had yet to happen. It's not uncommon in Ghana: Nana's house was even larger than David's and does have a small black intercom near every light switch. My house, on the other hand, was nothing of the sort. The Fulbright paid for our housing, therefore it was the smallest mansion available in comparison but still leaps and bounds larger than our last our last house in hillbilly-central Salado, Texas.

Three months ago our family moved to Accra, the capital of Ghana on my mom's Fulbright scholarship to teach. My dad quit his job to take up his passion as a housewife and chef; he spent his days in the kitchen practicing all sorts of African cooking. They all loved the Ghanaian food, culture, and people. I did, too; most of the time, at least.

“I found her!”

I raced back down the white marble spiral staircase, feet slipping across the pristine pink marble floor. This house always made me feel like a princess. Only the pale yellow tank-top and baggy cargo shorts ruined the allusion. On the back of the large, white steel front door David had found a note from his mother: “Eric's taking me shopping in Lome. Be back at 8.”

I swore. "Taxi?"

"Taxis are dangerous," David said. "People get kidnapped all the time."

"Not true," I countered, "I take one to school every day with Fox and Anna." Our family wasn't rich enough to afford a car, let alone a driver – and the Fulbright wouldn't shell out, so we mostly used taxi's to get around. It was fast, cheap, and efficient.

"Yea, but Fox is built like a beast. I can't believe you two are related. He's scary. You're not."

"You guys could come with me?"

They exchanged glances. Nana frowned. "But then we would just have to ride back again. I don't want to catch AIDS from the filthy seats."

"Seriously? Seriously? AIDS from the seats? Wow, I can't believe you just said that." I glanced down at my watch again, light blue plastic with red hearts drawn on the side – a gift from my sister. 6:53PM. "I don't have time for this; you guys are wimps." I unlocked the massive steel door and slipped out into the white light. Accra is located five degrees north of the equator and sits right on the coast of West Africa; if the heat doesn't kill you, the humidity will. I could already feel my skin burning in the sun. Squinting upward, there was not a single cloud resting on the pale blue and peach pallet. I was assaulted by the stench of human feces and fried food wafting from outside the surrounding gate. The compound itself was a courtyard protected by thick white cement, decorated with sweeping strokes of peach and red, imitating Japanese cherry blossoms. Once you walked closer, you could see the walls were adorned at the top with silver pronged spikes to discourage intruders. The front (and only) gate was double locked. I nodded to the family guard dressed in the traditional dark blue guard uniform with a pale yellow boarder, and he opened the gate of the compound for me. I could hear David and Nana trailing behind me, whining about the heat.

"Are you sure neither of you wants to come with me?" I pleaded once more. Our family had three rules. One: no going out after sunset, period. Two: Grace and Anna are not allowed to go anywhere alone. Three: Grace and Anna are not allowed to take a taxi by themselves. I thought these rules were a little overbearing. But I wasn't about to disobey them either. I was only fourteen, and as David had so astutely put, rather tiny.

Last time I was late, my parents automatically assumed something terrible had happened to me. I was yelled at and grounded.

Besides, I wanted to go on my class's school sponsored trip to Switzerland in December, so I had to keep clean. My school, Lincoln Community School, with just over six hundred students representing sixty-seven countries, was known for its rich populace, residing in pockets of wealth in Osu, Labone, Airport Residential, or Lagone area in Accra. David lived in the east side of Osu; I lived in central Labone.

I couldn't let Nana and David think I was a scared little girl; I worked way too hard keeping up a fearless rep. I checked my olive book-bag and was reassured to see a wad of dirty maroon, green, and navy cedis, the Ghanaian currency, clumped into a ball at the bottom. The entire clump was vaguely dirty looking. Nodding in satisfaction, I stepped out into the street and raised my hand to hail a cab. The population of Accra is close to three million, less than two percent owns a car. If you have to go somewhere, you walk. If you can't walk, you take a taxi. It takes, on average, forty-five seconds to hail a cab, less if you are foreign. It took ten seconds, at most, before a beat-up maroon and yellow taxicab skidded off to the side, sending dust up in a whirlwind. I choked slightly, and leaned through the cracked window on the passenger's side. The driver looked about forty, with beady little eyes and a toothy grin. He was overweight by Ghanaian standards and covered by a thin sheen of sweat that soaked in patches on his shabby brown T-shirt.

"How much to Cantonetce roundabout?"

"Obruni, I give you good price-o. 30,000 cedis."

Obruni is Twi, a tribal language, for 'white person' – literally translating to 'pink faced monkey.' I'd long since stopped being offended.

"Fifteen."

"Twenny-fiveh."

"Twenty. Last offer." He nodded. I looked back at Nana and David, standing awkwardly in the driveway of a white and pale yellow accented mansion with pink flowers radiating off the ominous cement and spiked walls. They made no move to join me - neither of them had ever ridden in a taxi, so there was no reason to start now. "Chivalry is dead" I called, as I slid into the back seat, the back of my thighs scratching across the cracked, brown leather seats.

"Oh my Obruni, you should meet mah son."

"No thanks."

"Oh, you must like him."

"Obiboni you are kind." I countered. He laughed at this, a

sort of unsettling sound that vibrated off the inside of the cab. Most foreigners don't speak a word of Twi; I spoke as much as a fourteen year old was expected to, which just meant basic useful phrases and insults. If they called me 'pink faced monkey,' I called them 'black faced monkey.' It makes us even. Before Nana, David, and I formed a band to eat up all our spare time, my family's guard, Emanuel, used to teach me for a couple minutes after school every day. "But you are too late. I am already married." I flaunted my right hand, adorned with a simple silver band. We had learned the best way to politely turn down local Ghanaian men's many proposals was to insist they were too late; you are already married to a tall, burly US Marine who lived at the military base and liked to crush people's skulls in. Fox had got the ring for his first girlfriend at Lincoln, a pretty blonde girl with a beautiful voice who sat next to him in Calculus, and passed it off to me when they broke up. He had no need for it. I did. Since Ghana has no legal marrying age, and most Ghanaians cannot accurately gauge a white person's age, I'd gotten away with it the last couple months.

"My son make better lover. Your babies be beautiful."

"No thank you."

"Obruni, you are mistaken-o. Just come greet him. He take you dancing."

"I don't dance," Which, of course, is a lie. I can tango and waltz my way across the floor like no one could believe. Sometimes I think I was born in the wrong era.

"He be a good lover, you be happy with him."

"I am quite happy with my husband." I insisted, growing more frustrated by the minute. I stared intently out the window at the scenery, running a list of things to do when I got home. I borrowed Fox's silver athletic shorts for soccer practice; I needed to slip them back into his closet before he missed them. I needed to beg more money off of my parents for school lunches. Tomorrow they were serving fried plantain and red-red, my favorite.

The cab driver cut through my train of thought. "He be better husband. He strong and kind."

"No!"

"You will make beautiful babies in America with him."

"No. No we won't. I'm not going to meet your son!" I slumped back against the seat in exasperation. I should have forced one of the boys to ride with me. But I didn't, and I paid for that. I was just too young. His toothy smile, that seemed endearing at first,

now protruded a menacing aura. Adrenaline mixed with dread and a smattering of regret ran my veins. I watched the scenery carefully, to ease my mind. I imagined home, and felt the reassuring presence of familiar landmarks; we passed my father and my favorite restaurant, known for groundnut soup, a thick peanut based broth, and fried plantain. Its trademark sign was red lettering sprawled across an off-white sign, 'Avoid your Wife Chop Shop' with a cartoon illustration of two happy Ghanaian men eating large bowls of steaming groundnut soup. I fell in love with it for its name, my father for its food – especially its unique usage of bush babies, large wild hamsters, in a special spicy black broth. The sight reassured me, an ignorant child trapped in that moving, sweltering canister of sweat, leather, and dirt.

... and then I remembered the Chop Shop was nowhere near my house. It was in the opposite direction.

"Ummmm..." Trying to sound as nonchalant as possible with a slight tremble, "Isn't this is Nungua? Cantonette roundabout is in the Labone area."

"Oh I'm not lost. We are goin' to stop by mah house so you meet my son. You will love him. You make beautiful babies in America wit' him."

"I'd... I'd rather not. Can you just take me home please?"

"Of course Obruni, after you greet my son."

My voice got louder. "No, I don't want to. Take me home now."

"Oh Obruni, it be quick."

"NO!" I shouted, "Pull over the car."

"Calm down Obruni. Just meet him once. You will love—"

"Pull over the car. PULL OVER." But he didn't. I was hyperventilating, seeing a mixture of white and red; I wasn't getting enough air. As I tugged frantically at my seatbelt, I came to realize I was just a scared little fourteen-year old girl, faced with the sudden realization that I was not invincible. The side of the road was lined by unaware street vendors. Why didn't they see me? The road was swarming with traffic, two lanes – bumper to bumper accompanied by a chorus of horns; the taxi couldn't go over twenty miles an hour. If I could get out, I reasoned, I would be safe. Safety in numbers.

The buckle finally came free with a snap. Without thinking, I slid across the blistering cracked leather seat, grasped the cracked grey door handle, pushed open the door, and stumbled out. I hit the ground running. I was on my feet two, almost three steps before

I fell forward, scarcely missing an old woman in indigo traditional attire, and hit the pavement flat as the wind rushing out of me like a hurricane. I saw white and tasted blood. Everything hurt.

Up ahead my taxi tried to stop, but was bombarded by a flare of horns. Thank God for crowded streets. Coughing I got shakily to my feet, my knees burning. I looked around uncertainly, the right side of my head still pounding from its date with the pavement.

A horn broke the spell, as a light blue Volvo swerved around to miss me. The driver held his right hand planted firmly on the horn, while his left hand presented the universal symbol of annoyance accompanied by a string of profanities. I jumped back, still shaky, and nearly tripped into the concrete gutter filled with feces and black plastic bags. The scent of sweat, human waste, fried food, and animals overloaded my senses. I still couldn't quite see straight; a large black woman with a silver bowl perched upon her head swore as I bumped into her, knocking the silver tin onto the road. Plastic square bags filled with water scattered everywhere, bouncing into oncoming traffic. She rounded on me, sweat dripping down into her face. "Stupid Obruni-coco!"

I ducked and ran. I ran past the stalls of fried meat pies and plantain, the smell of food making me queasy. I could still taste sharp metallic in my mouth, and my bloody lip was slowly running down my chin. I ran and ran, and every time I wanted to stop, I imagined that taxi driver running behind me, I could feel his hands tackling me and carrying me home with him to meet his son.

I don't know how long I long I ran until I was stricken by an asthma attack. My shirt clung to the sweat and dirt and rise and fall of my chest as I lay squatted over a gutter, hacking up my lungs. Finally I stopped. I rose shakily to my feet, testing the air. My cheeks were wet with tears; I wiped them away in embarrassment as I glanced around the surroundings, praying no one saw my breakdown.

I was in some sort of backstreet near a major road; I could see cars traversing in a steady stream up ahead. On one side, there was a series of wooden stalls selling bootlegged DVD's and T-shirts for discounted prices. They had the top fifteen members of the Black Stars, the Ghanaian national soccer team – football as they call it here – as well as the top couple players from the national Nigerian, South African and Kenyan football teams; together the jerseys painted a colorful rainbow of cheap spandex and textiles. Bellow was a selection of bootlegged DVDs. I recognized *Manspider 3* and *Caribbean Pirates 5*, two obviously plagiarized titles. Fox and I rented

Man-spider 3 a couple weeks earlier for its amusement factor; it was poorly filmed in Nigeria but still tried to follow the basic plot of the first two Spider-man movies, minus the special effects. It failed. Nigerian film companies, it turned out, did not have the budget to do any sort of suspended wire action or professional training. The entire film was shot with exotic angles to make up for the complete lack of Computer Graphics. The two booths were manned by a large Ghanaian missing his front tooth and wearing a Black Star's Jersey. Our eyes locked and I took a quick step back, afraid of his intentions. He broke into a toothy smile as he stepped forward holding an array of DVDs, his left arm adorned with leather necklaces with silver charms that jangled with each step. I ignored him and I strode towards the main road, still shaking with each step.

Squinting in the harsh light and surrounded by people, I stopped to think, trying to recall the training from when we arrived. I probably should have paid attention. First, I needed to get to a public place. Check. Second, I needed to get help. I dragged the blue cell phone out of my back pocket, releasing a sign of relief to see it wasn't broken. I hit the speed dial 2, for the home phone, but hung up just after the first ring. I had no idea where I was and Ghana is notorious for not having street signs; when you get in a taxi to go somewhere, you tell them a nearby location and then direct from there. Ditto for when you're giving out directions. I studied the street, the bustling vendors, and the buildings but recognized nothing. I sighed. I didn't even want to ask for directions. I was ashamed. I was embarrassed. I was supposed to be strong and independent, but I wasn't, and that thought humiliated me. In retrospect, I probably wasn't thinking clearly, but I just wanted to get out with my honor intact. And therefore, I only had one option. I hailed another taxi.

"How much to get to Cantonetce roundabout?"

"Twenty-five." The driver was thin and wearing a faded red shirt and jeans – the classic taxi 'uniform'. He was all smiles. His eyes narrowed at my condition. "Obruni, are you ok-o?"

"Yes, fine. Just... drive. Just drive." Not even bothering to haggle, I slid once more into the back seat, feeling the grey and black upholstery grate against my bare legs. I was still breathing heavily. This taxi seemed more sanitary than the first. A faded green pine air-hung from the rear view mirror, a sight I found strangely comforting.

I watched the scenery go by, trying to calculate my location. Albert Einstein once said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." Well, Albert Einstein

was never in my position. I didn't buckle my seatbelt, though, and kept my hand clenched on the door handle with the window rolled down. But we were going the right way. I pinpointed our location almost instantly: we were in Nungua. I sunk back into the upholstery to inventory my injuries. Both knees were covered in dirt, the right one was bleeding slightly, but it was easy enough to erase the damage with my pale yellow tank-top, already wet with sweat. The elbows were harder: skinned, but only the left one was oozing blood and had already settled into a dull ache. My head still throbbed, but as far as I could tell, it was not bleeding.

"Take a right here... then go straight... Ok, now a left at this street. It's the third house on the right." The sight of our compound's black, steel gate sent waves of relief gushing through my veins. I paid the driver thirty thousand cedis, dashing him an extra five thousand from his price, partly because I couldn't find exact change, but mostly for his speed and general non-creepiness. The bills were stained with sweat and other awkward stains. Money in Ghana is never clean.

Emanuel, our guard, opened the gate before I had a chance to knock. "You are early!" I glanced at my phone, 7:38PM. I guess that was still early by Ghanaian standards.

"I didn't want to miss dinner." Food was the last thing on my mind. "What did dad make?"

Emanuel shrugged. Western food was all the same to him.

The smell of melted cheese and sautéed meat wafted in through the dining room to the left as I slipped through the heavy steel side kitchen door. I made it all the way to the fourth step before the creaking in the old wooden stairs gave me away.

"We just started eating; wash up, grab a plate and come join us." Stupid old stairs.

"What's for dinner?" I slipped up two more stairs. Now if anyone went into the kitchen, all that would be visible through the railing would be my already vaguely clean legs.

"Enchiladas."

I could hear the excitement squeak in Anna's voice. Cheese was a rare thing in Ghana; we must have been celebrating something.

I didn't care. "Sorry, I already ate at David's." I dashed up the rest of the stairs before anyone could protest. If they saw me now, they would know. And my misplaced pride wouldn't let me do that. "I'm... gonna go shower."

Ten minutes later, under the stream of boiling water, I started sobbing uncontrollably. I cried and cried and cried as I rocked back

and forth, my sobs lost in the sound of cascading water. 'No one is ever going to know,' I swore to myself and let the water wash everything away. 'I will never allow myself to be defenseless again.' I was just too proud.

Six months later I was enrolled in Hokkaido International School, an English speaking boarding school in the frigid climate of Sapporo, Japan. Every weekend I went snowboarding on the slopes of Furano, the mountain that hosted the 1972 Winter Olympics, breathing in the cold air. It was a clean, frigid wonderland of security and healing. David and Nana were sad to see me go, but wrote letters and sent me expensive and useless presents for the first couple months.

I ended up never telling my parents what pushed me to leave Ghana for good. I meant to, once I was older and more dependable, but now my parents have made solid plans to retire in Ghana. Telling them now would just be bad form, right?

I don't know. I sign and glance down at my phone as it lets out the first four notes to the Portal theme. "New Message." I open it.

"We love you! Maybe next year!"

I shut the phone with a definite click. "I doubt it," I mutter, to no one in particular.

Gender Trouble

I am not sure
what the mannish hands of Carrie Bradshaw have taught me
about being a woman. I wanted
to be beautiful and loved and I wanted
to be like Anne Sexton,
not a woman, quite. I learned
how to change my tires but I have
a closet full of dresses that I don't wear because
they are too short and I am too
she—a girl
says feminism, quietly, to herself,
and do I think Simone de Beauvoir ever felt
a perfumed green
when Sartre pounded into the nothingness between
some French girl's legs? Hysterical
that we are all maybe
a dysfunction of the uterus, sinners
for eating too much
of the humble-apple pie. I am not sure
that I will ever come to know these slopes on my chest
as well as boys watching porn do. They can
tell me what it means, my round
eyes widening.
Did Hillary Clinton cry on television
because she knows something that
I do not know
or because those shoulder pads were too
heavy? I am not sure
if my fingernails should be painted red or pink or black or clear
or embedded in a man's back. I am not sure
that I am willing
or able
to handle the answer.

The Internet Connection at Ursinus College

Holy Shit

I can't see

I think I'm having an aneurism.

This has got to be what it feels like,

I want to lean over and throw up into the waste basket that I keep by my desk.

It's lined with a plastic bag from Wawa, maybe CVS, I don't know.

Whichever it is, clean up will be easy.

I want to rifle my mouse as hard as I can into my concrete wall and watch as it disintegrates into a million sprites of plastic, metals, carbons, lights, whatever else makes up a computer mouse.

In high school I played baseball and I often found myself in a similar situation.

Walking back to the bench, bat in hand, helmet upon my head.

Sometimes: bat in hand, helmet in other hand.

And listen: I wanted to throw that helmet five feet into the dirt,

And send the bat whirlybirding out into the field of play.

Can't do that though, you'd get thrown out.

Instead, I laid them down gently next to the fence and walked back behind the bench.

I took my hat off of the fence and put it over my face.

Then I would scream as loud as I possibly could.

I would think of the dirtiest, grossest, absolutely horrifying phrase or scenario

And scream it into that hat.

Evil Deeds

"I've been in this game for years; it's made me an animal."

— Notorious B.I.G.

Waking up in a cesspool of your own piss and vomit on the concrete floor of a basement you've never been in before isn't always a bad thing. It doesn't always mean that you bumped six Vicodin off a toilet seat or that you cracked a bottle over your buddy's head. It doesn't always mean that you took a shit in a big black piano or kicked your steel-toed Timberland boots through the dry-wall of a home gym. It doesn't necessarily mean any of those things. Sometimes it does. This morning it did.

The vomit is black. My sweatpants and Duke Lacrosse sweatshirt are drowned in it. The piss is invisible but the smell is distinct even through the stench and taste of the puke. TJ kicks me hard in the hip and I roll over.

"Wake up, you piece of shit."

TJ weren't his initials; they stood for Tall John, because he is really goddamn tall. His arms are bones but his face is fat. People say he looks like Mr. Potato-Head on a stick.

"Get up," he says as he kicks me. "Get the fuck up, we got to go before Billy finds those holes in the wall."

I push myself up with a faint grunt. I can hear my liver. It's crying. "Where we getting breakfast, TJ?" I didn't care where; it was just a desperate plea for some food.

"I'm taking you home. You smell like piss."

We walk slowly out of the basement door onto the crunchy cold grass. It's the kind of grass that has snow on it but doesn't really have snow on it. It's the kind of grass that reminds you how cold it is. It reminds you that the white boogers that are still infested with the Vicodin you snorted last night will freeze if you don't pick them out and eat them. Eating boogers isn't gross if you're doing it to get high. It's my second favorite way of getting over a hangover.

We get to TJ's Honda Civic and he grabs his towels from the trunk. One is a Batman towel; the other is the Flintstones. I don't even know where the hell he got them. We always bring towels to

parties. Well, we always bring towels to parties since McGrorty's open house two summers ago. He lays the towels down roughly across the passenger's seat.

"Get in, smelly." He laughs to himself.

I'll probably be driving his ass around once I get my license back. Then he probably won't be able to talk to me like that.

As TJ starts the car I take out my tin, mint Skoal long cut.

"Really? Packing a lip right now man? It's 8:30 am. Wait, 8:22 and you're covered in puke."

I open the tin and stick the fat black pinch of tobacco and fiber glass into my gums. Warning: This product is not a safe alternative to cigarettes. Warning: This product can cause mouth cancer. The warnings are written in thick white letters on a bold black background.

"TJ, did you do that history homework for Mr. Forton?"

"You're still fucking high man. Will you roll up the window and spit into a fucking bottle. It is cold as shit." The car is so old you have to push the window with your fingers while you press the close button, but TJ is right. It is cold as shit.

"You remember any of last night, TJ?"

"You were retarded last night, bro. You kicked two holes in Bill's house and at one point you were passed out on a treadmill. We turned it on."

I used to hate the "r" word. My cousin, Sean, had Smith-Magenis Syndrome. He had a cleft-lip and would rip out his fingernails. He was six years older than me and he used to beat the shit out of me. He had tantrums all the time and would wail on me for hours. His fists would fly at me harder and faster than my father's ever could. After I got knocked around by Sean a few times my dad didn't really scare me anymore. I used to get a lot of shit in the neighborhood for getting my ass beat by a slow kid. He might have beaten the shit out of me but I would defend him to the death. If anyone dropped the "r" word around me things got real nasty, real fast. One time I heard a rumor that he was running naked through our local public school. This little punk Jimmy McCormick started giving me shit for it. I broke Jimmy's jaw in six places and sent him to the hospital. Anyway, he died a few years ago and so did my

anger toward anyone who said the “r” word. I even say it myself sometimes.

Fairmount Park is spinning past. It is littered with hypodermic needles and empty 40’s. They are the only remnants of a ravenous night had by all the crack heads and heroin fiends that hang out in the Park even in the worst of winter. City cops won’t pull over any white boys on this side of Philly.

“We should have taken East River Drive.” The actual name is Kelly Drive, but anyone from around here won’t call it that.

“There’s too much construction,” he says.

I spit out some of the sludge from deep in my throat. The spit is as black as my puke from last night. This dip doesn’t taste right. It tastes like blood. Maybe I have a sinus infection, the blood spilling from deep inside my face to mix with the wet tobacco stuck in between my lip and teeth.

“I think I shit in his piano.”

“I don’t think you should re-up on those pills.”

“I only have two left.”

Then there’s just Silence, Silence, Silence.

“That’s not what I mean, Pat, and you fucking know it.”

He says it softly almost like he didn’t want me to hear. We get to City Ave. and the Five Guys is closed. Chipotle is too. The McDonalds is open 24/7 but it’s not worth asking TJ to buy me breakfast again. Besides, it’s out of the way. If I was driving I would take the extra five minutes to get some delicious McGriddles, but I don’t drive anymore.

I’m spitting my black sticky saliva into an Alex’s Lemonade Stand bottle. I guess that’s ironic. I start to fall asleep and choke on the tobacco. “I got to hook it, man.” TJ ignores me and I pull the slime out of my mouth. I throw the gunk into the bottle and wipe my brown-dyed fingers onto the edge of TJ’s cracked leather seat.

“That was like fifteen minutes. You’re soft as shit.”

“Dude, why did Billy walk in on me bumping those pills?”

“Why did you bust that bottle on his head?”

I forgot about that. I shouldn’t have done that. Billy looks like a bowling pin; all his fat goes straight to his hips. He really is a strange looking human being. “We made up,” I say, “Well, we kind of

made up.”

“Billy is a faggot,” he says, “but did you make up with Amanda? Because she was pretty pissed.”

Shit, Fuck, Cock, Balls I forgot about Amanda. I was standing at the edge of the beer pong table staring at her. She was all over TJ. She was kissing his neck, hugging him, and basically giving him a dick rub right in the middle of the party. He was holding her Tiffany bracelet in his hand and whispering to her about something. I heard that she owned the whole Tiffany collection. That she had gotten it for her confirmation or something. TJ knew I had been trying to get with her for at least six months.

“Amanda, you trying to play some pong?” I had said.

She looked over at me for a second. “Maybe later, buddy,” she said cheerily.

Is she fucking kidding me? Does she not even know my fucking name? Why am I always an afterthought with these girls? That’s all I’ve ever been, just a goddamn afterthought.

“Yo, what’s my name? Amanda, what’s my name?”

She smiled then looked at TJ for help and he whispered into her ear. She said “Pete?”

“It’s Pat, you stupid bitch.” I was yelling at her now. “We had religion class together for three years and you can’t remember my goddamn name.”

“Well, maybe if you were nicer to me and dressed like you belonged here I would remember you better.”

“You’re just like all the other girls at St. Steve’s. You’re a rich, snobby whore.”

“Why don’t you get the hell out of my face and go back to whatever trailer park you crawled out of.”

TJ stood there just watching me. He had his hand on her butt the whole time and when I walked away he didn’t even have to say a word and she was all over him again. Maybe if I hadn’t lost my scholarship to St. Steve’s I wouldn’t have blown up on her like that. Maybe if I hadn’t hurt my shoulder over the summer I wouldn’t have left that argument and snorted enough pills to kill a rhino. Maybe if my parents had a few more dollars I would have been the one getting a hand job in the middle of the party.

We're flying down Lincoln Drive. It is a twenty-five miles-per-hour zone and with good reason: the curves are sharp and the lanes are skinny. The median is plagued with scrapes from stray cars. The black asphalt is covered in a thick layer of slippery ice. We're pushing fifty-five mph. Calling Amanda a rich snobby bitch isn't the worst thing I've done but it's close.

"She's cute, Pat, real cute. If she's over it you should try and hit that. I almost fucked her last night and I wasn't even trying."

"Maybe; or maybe I already did, man," That was a mistake. A stupid joke that wasn't even funny that won't be funny if he finds out, if anyone finds out. I think I'm going to puke. No, no, I won't puke, it was just a joke and there's no way he knows. No way she knows. Maybe she knows.

"Dude, you think I should quit dipping? My mouth is killing me." I just want to change the subject.

"I think you should stop shoving that shit up your nose."

I made a mistake. Never say the words "stop" or "quit" around TJ. I know better than that.

I sigh and half-heartedly reply, "I need it man. My shoulder still hurts."

TJ takes his eyes off the rugged road and stares at me, right at my eyes. "Pat, FUCK YOU. HOW ABOUT THAT PAT, FUCK YOU. Your shoulder is fine and has been..." His voice trails off and he rubs his face. He rubs it so I can't tell he's crying, so that I can't see how weak this shit has made him, so that I don't think less of him. I rub mine too for some of the same reasons.

"Don't tell me what to do TJ. You don't know shit about it."

"Fuck you Pat. I know everything I need to know. I know you're a piece of shit who won't even listen to his best friends' advice."

"If you're my best friend then why did you get with Amanda? Why, TJ? You know what, don't even answer that, because you may have gotten with her last night but I fucked her." That was a mistake. I shouldn't have said that. Now he definitely knows and my life is over.

"Bullshit; Amanda would never even touch you."

"Really? Then how did I get this?" I pull out my phone and

show him the picture I took of her last night.

"What are you showing to me man? She's passed out."

"I fucked her last night, man. I fucked Amanda." I say it loud.

TJ pulls onto Buckingham Ave. and reaches across me to open my door. "Get out. Go home, Pat. It's only 10 blocks." He's surprisingly calm now.

I don't say a word, just start walking along the frozen icy sidewalk. TJ closes the door and pulls up next to me with the window down. I can't help but wonder how he's going to close it.

"Pat. HEY PAT. We're done talking, like, ever."

TJ drives away. The kid is gone. He won't say a word, not a fucking word to anyone, but I just lost my best friend. I yell at his fiery tail pipe, "Yo TJ, Johnny, I'm sorry man." He doesn't hear me and I don't really care. I'm crying now; the tears melt against my pock-marked face. I open the orange pill bottle and finish the Vicodin. It's all good though, best friends are a dime a dozen anyway. He was never the kind of friend whose shoulder you could cry on. He was never the type of friend that really gave two shits about me. I'll find a new one of those in a week, week and a half at most. My sweatpants are sticking to the black ice underneath my feet.

Last night I was walking down the long upstairs hallway of Billy's parents' mansion. My sweatpants were sticking to the rich red carpet. She was sprawled out, legs open, on the edge of a black flowery formal sofa. She was passed out. Her tight black leggings ran up underneath her tight grey dress. I could hear Eminem screaming on the basement speakers, the base bumping, forcing me forward like the war drums of old. The song was "Evil Deeds" and I had heard it a million times before. Eminem was barking at me. His voice was calloused and angry. He was telling me to walk toward her, closer and closer. "Lord please forgive me for what I do, for I know not what I've done," said Eminem. My brain was Natty Light soup.

The bedroom she was in was a masterpiece minus the soon to be ravaged girl lying nearly dead on the couch at the foot of the satin covered bed. I brushed her dirty blonde hair from her face. Her eyes were nothing, just skin. Her head was resting on a decorative pillow that read "May the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at

your back.” I had heard it before. It was some kind of Irish proverb. It made me think of my grandmother. I popped open my pill bottle and put another Vicodin into my mouth. I’m not even sure how I remember this. I put my finger into her already open mouth and said “Amanda, hey Amanda, wake up girl.” No response, she didn’t even move her lips. I knelt down and put my hand on the inside of her thigh. I’m going to hell. I said again, “Wake up, girl.” Nothing. Then I kissed her. “Father please forgive me for I know not what I do, I just never had the chance to ever meet you,” sang Eminem. My brain was mashed potatoes, not even homemade mashed potatoes; my brain was instant mashed potatoes.

I pulled her leggings down to just below her hips. She turned her face away from me. I jumped up and backed away. She was still asleep, still non-responsive. I turned on the lights and leered over her. I took out my phone and took a picture for future masturbation purposes. “Therefore I did not know that I would grow to be, my mother’s evil seed and do these evil deeds,” yelled Eminem. I pushed my finger tightly against my left nostril and snorted the remnants of my Vicodin binge. My brain was leaking out of my skull; I was drowning in fluids of dysfunction.

I put my hand between her thighs. Then my fingers started to violently fumble around. I stared at the sealed lids of her eyes as they started to flutter open. “Evil Deeds while I plant these evil seeds,” screams Eminem in one last distant roar.

As I left I saw her silver Tiffany Bracelet hanging loosely from her wrist. I grabbed her hand and ripped the bracelet off of her. I threw it to the ground and crushed it under my heavy boots. Then I stared at her eyes. They were closed.

I slip on the slick sidewalk and fall into a frozen sea of weeds. It wakes me from my memories. I can’t keep thinking about it. It happened and is what it is.

I look up to my house from the sidewalk. This is a shit hole. The black shingles litter our front lawn. Dad should have fixed the roof before winter. Maybe if he had Connor’s help, or even my help it would be done. The façade is eggshell and it’s ugly. I honestly don’t care what the house looks like. It’s what’s on the inside that counts right? Wrong; that’s always been wrong. Even if it were right, what’s

on the inside is pretty shitty too. I wish Billy had to live here. I wish TJ or any of my rich boy prep school friends had to live here. I wish anyone had to live here, just not me.

I walk up my driveway. The car is gone. My parents must be at Connor's basketball game. He doesn't play anymore; he's just a manager. But my parents still make sure they support him in any way they can, better than they ever would have done with big brother Patty. I walk up the handicap ramp my dad built for Connor that leads to the back door. What I've learned, if anything, is that when you come home you have to be ready to dig. You got to dig a deep hole under your skin right in your belly. In there you can hide all the bullshit that your parents try to feed you. You can hide all the shit that makes you feel awful. All the beatings and 'good old Irish guilt' go right into that hole. Then, when you finally get your hands on something nice like some pills or beers or something, you can flush all that shit right out of you.

The door is open and I go into the kitchen. I stare at the cabinets above the stove for a while. A few minutes but it feels like a few days. I don't have any choice. My shoulder is killing me. If TJ didn't make me walk those last few blocks through this frozen wasteland it wouldn't be as bad. I open the cabinet and dig through the Tylenol and Motrin until I find Connor's orange prescription bottle. I crack it open and take three Vicodin. I wash it down with faucet water and leave the bottle open on the counter. I don't care if my parents find it. I don't care if Connor doesn't get the pills he needs.

I don't give a fuck about you, Connor. I don't care that I cracked your hip and spine in twelve places a year ago. I don't care that I was drunk and high on all kinds of shit when I picked you up from practice last year. I don't care that my engine went through your chest and now your body is broken and ruined forever. I don't care that Sean is dead and I'll never see him again. I don't care that I live in this shitty house with even more shitty parents. I don't care that TJ isn't my friend anymore. I don't care that Amanda might press charges. I don't care that I shit in random places all over Billy's parents' mansion. I don't care that I probably broke his nose with a bottle of Corona last night. I don't care that I do drugs because my

shoulder still fucking hurts. I don't care about any of that. I don't care about fucking anything.

As I crawl into my unmade piece of shit bed I smell my piss-stained, vomit covered sweats. I pull off my Duke Lacrosse sweatshirt and kick off my Timberland boots. I can't get the sweat pants off. The cold vomit and piss is making them stick to my legs. All I can think is that I don't care about them. I'll just go to sleep anyway because I don't care about anything.

Assuming You'll Still Be Here

We sit on the worn grey couch,
the room like an abandoned street
after the sun has left,
its long-necked lamps
exposing patches of gritty sidewalk.
Stains of orange shift
over objects hidden in darkness
like those night-time street corners.

I settle against his chest.
The shadows stumble,
revealing living room walls,
scrubbed clean of small hands.
The dreaming dog whimpers
in the armchair, twitching
like the flame of the candle
on the oak coffee table.
Fear exiled by the smell
of shampoo.

His nails skate in circles
down my arm. Five tiny feathers
float over skin,
tingling ringing in each pore.
His fingers find mine,
and I forget
the fallen pines,
encased in ice,
responsible for the ripped wires
lying ruined in our streets.

We wish for an end
to the weeks without water
foaming from faucets,

and the dark that creeps
in corners,
gaining confidence
the longer the lights are lost.

Sprinting unseeingly
toward the meaning of misery,
we talk of Monopoly games
where we won't
have to squint
at the price of a property.
Assuming,
when the lights come on,
you'll still want to play.

Francesca

The restaurant we met in was a crap hole. Our booth's seats were that red vinyl that cheap diners always have, and were next to a large window that smelled like disinfectant. The menu was strictly Americana, printed on white paper. There were pictures of sundaes and fries to remind the dull regulars what food looked like.

The waitress was an attractive brunette in a navy blue uniform. She took our orders in a working-class accent.

"The veggie omelet please, with egg whites." I gave her a nod. She had a silver nose ring that looked sexy against her fake-tan skin.

"I'll have the uh... well, how large is the salad that comes with this?" Mrs. Lesczewski pointed to her menu. I gritted my teeth.

Mrs. Lesczewski was hopeless. She always had been, I was sure, the plain girl in high school who no one would ask to dances or waste time talking to. Her blonde hair was neatly combed, conservative (slightly below the neck) and so mundane career-woman that it made my penis hurt just looking at it. She was wearing a pair of dark, baggy jeans and a thick orange knit-sweater that was too heavy for the day's weather.

Mr. Lesczewski grunted an order for soup and proceeded to stare into his lap. His discomfort was familiar.

He was stout, and his beer gut was testing his khakis' waist. His gray polo bulged like a sofa beneath a tarp. His face comprised low cheekbones and a curved, pointed nose that created the illusion that his glasses frames were sinking into his face. He had never looked physically attractive to anyone ever, including his dull wife. He kept shaking his right leg underneath the table while we waited.

I took a swig from my water, careful not to spill any on my white oxford, and opened up shop for the day.

"Let's get started, then. Here are some forms I believe you'll want to peruse." I placed my leather messenger bag on the empty half of my seat, and pulled out a folder marked 'Lesczewski.' "As you can see," I said while distributing two identical stacks of beautiful paper, "my basic info is in here: physical health write-up, recent mental evaluation, list of accomplishments, Xeroxes of my SAT

scores and diplomas, pictures of my high school varsity letters and trophies.”

I gave them a few seconds.

“I know this is a lot, so let’s start with physical health because that tends to receive primary focus. If you’ll just look at the copies of my most recent physical that I handed you,” they flipped to the section marked ‘Physical Data,’ “it’s apparent that I am an exceptionally healthy person. No asthma, no allergies, no heart or lung defects. Blood work—”

“What about family history?” Mr. Lesczewski adjusted his glasses. “You may have high genetic risk-factors that wouldn’t show up here.”

“Great question,” I lied. “If you’ll move three pages behind the physical, you’ll see recent evaluations of both of my parents, including my father, who is no longer alive. He died in an accident, though. Not from poor health. Copies of his obit and autopsy are available for your review the next page over.”

“Goodness, they are,” Mrs. Lesczewski said.

“That’s right,” I beamed. “My whole life is here, on these pieces of paper for you to see.”

“And the ad said that you have a doctorate? From Penn?” Lesczewski leaned back in his seat.

“Yes, Mr. Lesczewski. I received a doctorate in anthropology from Penn three years ago.”

“And you’ve donated before?” Mrs. Lesczewski asked.

“Also correct.” I extended my right hand toward Mrs. Lesczewski. “I’m very familiar with this process.”

Our waitress returned with the food. She was careful to set the plates around the paper packets.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” I smiled. The waitress smiled back. Too easy.

“Oh goodness, she’s very pretty.” Mrs. Lesczewski pointed her head toward the departing waitress.

I showed her a picture from the packet. “If you want to see pretty, then just look right here.”

“Goodness, she is. She’s lovely,” Mrs. Lesczewski said.

“That’s Francesca. She’s nearing three. Her parents were kind

enough to send me that picture.”

Francesca was the deal-sealer. Her tattooed, lesbian parents had been the first to obtain my services. I met them at a friend's party, and a few days later they sent me an unexpected email. I asked for an incredible fee as a “screw you” for the awkward question. But they agreed to pay without a complaint.

The picture the lesbians had sent me was of Francesca in a sandbox, crouched on her feet with her butt parallel to the ground, the way that poor Asian farmers sit. Her dark brown hair is raised behind her from what must have been the wind that day, and she has this great smile on her face. Francesca alone will keep me in business for years.

“She looks just like you.” Mrs. Lesczewski said. She smiled.

“She’s an adorable kid,” I said.

Lesczewski leaned in to ask another question, but his wife cut him off.

“All of this physical and information is great, and we thank you for it.” She ran a pale, freckled hand through her hair. “But it’s also very important to me that our child grows up to be a good person. Someone who will make a positive difference in the world. And I realize that outcome may be entirely up to us, but either way I’d still like to be familiar with who you are. As a human being.”

I stared back.

“So, could you give us a sense of yourself as a person?”

“Yes – of course, Mrs. Lesczewski.” I smiled reassuringly. “Well, I don’t know if this will give you any insight, but the reason I became a professional donor, and why I remain a professional donor, is because I care sincerely about helping people. That’s the reason my rates are so affordable; it’s about more than money for me.”

While Mrs. Lesczewski was enthusiastically nodding, her husband knocked over his glass. It had broken, and water was spreading across the table.

“I’ll get the waitress.” I smiled and gestured to Nose-ring that there had been a spill.

She came over with a rag and leaned across the table to reach Lesczewski’s corner, opposite from me. The top of her pink blouse was open and her cleavage was nice. She caught me sneaking a peek.

After she left, Lesczewski eyed me with a raised brow.

"Are you religious at all? It doesn't matter which religion. Or if any," Mrs. Lesczewski asked.

This was starting to get awful. I thought they may as well get a donor mother too, if this woman's genes were encoded to ask questions like that.

"Yes, yes." I stroked my chin. I took a guess from the name. "I'm Russian Orthodox."

"So are we!" Mrs. Lesczewski squealed. "Where do you attend?"

"Saint Michael's," I said, nodding.

"On Third? That's where we used to attend! Honey, can you believe this?" She put her hand on Lesczewski's shoulder. He didn't respond, and instead kept alternating between looking out the window and at me.

"You know what, I think I saw you talking to Father John once," Mrs. Lesczewski said. "I thought there was something familiar about you."

"Father John, he's quite a warrior," I said. "We're very close. He baptized me. I can't wait to hear his next sermon. He's such a great orator."

Lesczewski's eyes landed on me. "Father John's dead. He's been dead for two years."

Mrs. Lesczewski nodded.

"Actually I haven't been in a few... I mean..."

"So you don't go to Saint Michael's?" Mrs. Lesczewski asked.

"I go. I used to. I just haven't been back in a while. I just got so excited about working with you, with helping you two, that I exaggerated a bit. You seem like you'd be such great parents."

"It's ok if you don't go to Saint Michael's. Just please, be honest with us. We'd certainly prefer honesty," Mrs. Lesczewski said.

I straightened and shifted away from Mrs. Lesczewski and toward her husband.

"Look, Mr. Lesczewski. Let's be serious now. This is what you want." I pointed to my statistics on the table. "I can give you the best biological material. Simple transaction. And then you can do whatever the hell you want with that stuff. You can take the kid to

Saint Michael's five times a day. That's up to you."

He stared at me; Mrs. Lesczewski tried to lean into the conversation.

"But really? Church? I mean, have you read a read single thing about behavioral theory? Ever? We're talking about simple nature versus nurture here. Our goddamn waitress would understand this. If you want a kid worth having then you hire me for the genetic stuff, and you worry about his moral character later. Otherwise, you're going to be staring at yet another mediocre human being."

Mrs. Lesczewski and I waited on her husband. His face had flushed, and he took a few seconds to wipe his glasses with his shirt. Then he put his arm around his wife.

"Thank you, no. We'll find another way." He stood up with Mrs. Lesczewski and threw a couple bills onto the table.

"Big mistake," I called as they walked toward the doors.

I picked up the money from the table and went to the resister to pay for the bill. Nose-ring rang me up. She kept her eyes focused on the register when I handed her the money.

"So look. I know a great bar down the street." I gave her my perfect smile. "When are you off?"

She laughed. "No thanks, buddy."

10/28/11, Third Poem

ah it's good to be living
 in between centuries
Rilke had mixed feelings but that was a different time
 and besides
this is a century of gaudy absolutes
its big millennium premises
its computers already, its little new technologies
its hot foods, big markets, fish in bright slick colors
its chemicals but we can't say the names
 so mostly we don't talk about them
we talk a little about aspartame
this is a sweet century
we will have it no other way
this is a century of oils
 fried foods shoes with funny little magics in them
 to burn away the fried foods (in the next century
 this will actually work)
butter substitutes; substitutes for butter substitutes
we have all learned a few things
 about nutrition, like how
 to annoy the living hell out of your loved ones
 by telling them to count out individual almonds
 or anything simultaneously involving scales and boxes of
 chocolates
life is not so long and not so simple
and maybe it is alright this winter if I have a little glass
 of egg nog
although I'm desperately afraid, I'm deliriously afraid,
 I'm positively giddy with worry
that I will take the next logical step
and drink the whole carton, and be a poor example
 of myself for a few days while I moan
 in utter abjection on a sofa watching college sports
 with my father

but if I could stick to a glass maybe that would be alright, keep me
perched between total health and buoyant splendor

The Black Dirt Region

My sister Abbie and I meet our father at Luberto's Brick Oven Restaurant in Dublin, Pennsylvania. The mission: to collect documents that he needed to sign in order for me to be covered under his insurance.

A business dinner. That's what our relationship had come to.

As we drive the winding and farm infested back roads of Dublin, both of us writhe and squirm in nylon seats. Would he pretend like everything was perfect between us? What kind of a mood would he be in tonight? These are the questions my sister and I ask ourselves and each other on the way to the restaurant. We don't know the answers to any of them.

I gaze out of the window and see dirt. The color black everywhere. "Hey, do you remember when all of us went to Pine Island for the polka dance?" I ask my sister.

She smiles and nods.

"Did you think they'd get back together again after that?"

Her smile fades. "Don't be silly, Kris."

~

We pull into the parking lot and see him waiting on the sidewalk: beige dress pants, a wrinkled, green, striped dress shirt and glasses. These silver rimmed spectacles were new for him. He looks old.

The three of us enter the restaurant and wait an uncomfortable five minutes for a booth. In the presence of freshly baked brochette and white buttered rolls, we complete our business transaction. Then, my father takes off his glasses with his weathered and greasy hands and utters the words I thought he would never say, "Girls, can we talk?"

My father speaks in broken sentences, slow and methodical, almost as if he is learning to sound out consonants and vowels, like a toddler. This evening there is a touch of sadness and yearning in his voice, an unfamiliar sound. He says he wants to be close to Abbie and I and have a healthy father-daughter relationship. He wants to feel like family again. Family. I tried so hard to remember what that was. My mind takes me back six years....

On May 30th, 2005, my mother, father, sister and I travelled to Pine Island, New York. The mission: to hear the eighteen-time Polka Music Grammy Award winner Jimmy Sturr and his Orchestra play. With a last name like Cichowski, it's pretty much a given that we polka. Thinking about it, I reject the cruel stereotypes of polka, depicting images of Urkel in "Family Matters" sliding across the living room with a humongous accordion. This cultural dance allowed the four of us to come together as a family again after five years of my parents being separated and my mom, sister and I living separate from my father. I do not quite remember how and why this happened. The only thing that mattered was that day was my mom and dad's anniversary and that we were all together again in one car, going to the same place. The three hour long drive to upstate New York was eased with listening to "The Best of Bud Hundenski and the Corsairs," "Gene Mendowski and the G Men," and of course "Jimmy Sturr". It was summer and the scent of freshly cut grass and burnt hotdogs from backyards on the grill infiltrated our nostrils while we caught up on back roads. My sister and I spewed stories of the past school year to both mom and dad. My mom could have recounted these tales word for word she had heard them so many times, but for my father this was all new. He was lost in this conversation so he just smiled and nodded while focusing on the asphalt ahead. He played the role of driver; controlling how fast or slow we all went along. He determined which roads we took and which we strayed from because at that moment, the drive to Pine Island was the only route he could navigate.

After two and half full hours, we travelled right through a flat stretch of farmland.

"Oh, ya see girls? Ya see that there? They're growin' onions out there. We're up in the black dirt region now. Looks like they've used a D42 combine with a cylinder pipe to make a nice clean plot there..."

My father is a farmer.

My mom, sister were silent as he explained the process of onion planting. Part of me got mad that my soccer goal and two second love affair with Chet Crawford were topics worth glossing

over. Yet another part of me embraced the fact that for the first time in a while, I was able to hear my father's voice talk about something he was passionate about. I sat in amazement at how he could stare out his driver side window and still remain steady on the road. My eyes juggled between the thin and narrow stripes of blackness outside of the car and my father's hands inside steering the wheel. He continued on with his onion monologue as I studied his round and calloused fingers. As large as his hands are, his nails are small, bitten and chewed so that the skin at the tip of his fingers exceeds the actual nails. Underneath, a line of dirt demarcated where the growth had stopped. The color of this line was the same as the onion fields. Black.

The four of us pulled into a long, stone driveway and reached territory we were all familiar with: the polka world. Rubber tires sank into a grassy lot and we parked in between maroon and white SUVs and boat-like Buicks. The distant sounds of drums and trumpets lured us to the large and wooden pavilion stationed at the bottom of a hill. Our sneakers were tainted with the dust we kicked up barreling through the stone pathway. The aroma of kielbasa, sauerkraut, Mrs. T's pierogies and cabbage and noodles floated through the humid air.

Inside the pavilion, off-white, plastic tables with brown legs extended from the bandstand all the way to the backside of the enclosure. A raised platform at the front of the awning supported glittery, Easter-egg-purple music stands. "Jimmy Sturr and his Orchestra" was strewn in gold cursive. Jimmy wore black jeans with white Reeboks. He sported a short sleeve red shirt that sparkled with glitter. He had the makings of a walking American flag if not for the black jeans. The four of us placed purses, coolers and cameras on a table right in front, close to the dance floor.

Song after song, my sister and I rotated dancing with mom and then dad, hopping and spinning around in the circular motion of the polka. While dancing with my dad during the "Pennsylvania Polka," my hand rested on his sweaty back. It was one of the sturdiest surfaces with which I have ever come in contact. When I looked up at him and met his glassy eyes with mine, I felt safe. As we twirled, I spotted faces on the sidelines celebrating how my father and I pushed and pulled in time with the bass of the drums. The

song ended and my dad led me back to the table. As he wiped the sweat off of his forehead with a napkin, the Clarinet Polka began: my mom and dad's wedding song. My Dad threw the napkin onto the table and turned to my mom, "Well, Sue...whadda ya say?" I looked to my sister and smiled. My mom got up from the chair, adjusted her capris and said, "Eh, what the hell."

As Abbie and I rested on the folding chairs, we watched our parents dance. In my world, they were the only couple on the floor and my eyes were glued to their movement. In this moment of artistry their bodies were in perfect syncopation. My dad's rough hands became gentle and loose when wrapped around my mom's waist. After they made a turn, my mom's teeth glowed as a soft smile became her. They had gone easy on my sister and me before now. This was dancing. With every blare of the clarinet, they danced faster and faster back in time. Their summer shorts and shirts peeled off and were replaced with a long sleeve, high neck wedding dress and suit with tails. They transformed into the youthful strangers I once watched in a home video celebrating in an events hall somewhere in New Jersey. My sister and I didn't dare speak to one another. As the music came to a crescendo and my mother's hair caressed my father's fingers, my heart surged with hope that the song would last forever. I imagined us doing this every weekend for a long time. I believed I could steal back those Sunday mornings when I woke up to the smell of bacon and eggs and my mom and dad at the kitchen sink together. I couldn't stop smiling when I watched my parents reenact Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I couldn't stop thinking that our family was back again. As the song came to an end and the dancing had stopped, my sister and I cheered for our returning parents who still held on to each other when back at the table.

On our way back, Mom drove with Abbie in the passenger seat. I sat in the back. Only this time, I was with my dad. All of us were drunk with happiness. His smile and demonstrative gestures, unveiled to me yet another version of my dad this day. His hands fumbled with the Styrofoam doggie bags and kielbasa and strands of sauerkraut splattered onto the seat. The car erupted into laughter at this and many other silly instances on the car ride home. At a toll booth, my sister asked my happy father for some change. He

extended his hand out, dropped what he believed to be change into the palm of my sister's hand. "Uh dad, you gave me a tic tac."

On the way back my dad forgot about the onions when we passed by the Black Dirt Region. Instead of talking about combine travel patterns, he slid right next to me in the back seat of the car and put his arm around me.

"I love ya, Kristin. I love ya." He rubbed his hand up and down my arm.

"I love you too, dad."

I meant it and I wondered if he did too.

~

The leftovers of our lasagna lie before us. I slump next to my father in the leather booth at Luberto's. Mostly everyone has gone home. Just like that day with the onions, my dad gingerly places his hand around my shoulder. I feel tears well in my eyes. It feels so unnatural and foreign for me to collapse into his wrinkled shirt and hold his hand. I want his touch to be as gentle as it was that day he held my mother dancing, but something about it is weak and unconvincing. I don't feel safe. His fingernails are even darker tonight.

After our goodbyes, we go our separate ways. As Abbie and I pass open fields of land, I break the silence.

"I really thought we were going to be a family again after that day. How stupid."

"Yeah... Me too, Kris. Me too."

October

I. Transition

Apple cores garnish street corners,
abandoned on the rims of trash bins,
lying in once complementary grass.
Their presence is a tangible finality
drawn in by the wind,
prying past your pursed lips,
raking at your throat,
shaking christened fragments of earth
from their claws.

II. Dying

The colors of dying
are swept up under shuffling feet
past the artificial red lips of an addict
waned by the kiss of another,
the burnt orange jumpsuit
of a prisoner denied light,
the yellow nectar of a flower
leeches by the hands of a child.

III. Denial

A child in a mask weeks before it's time
passes the girl in cut off shorts
ignoring the tiny bumps rising on her arm.
We wait for crueler months
when death will leave its corpses
sleeping under frozen mantles
and tears are too cold to form
into anything perceivable.

Actions that affirm and confirm us as a community

We are honest poets.
We concentrate. We generate
Melody we extrapolate. We string
Words like popcorn on dental floss.
We build phrases sturdy like ham on rye.
Crunchy and soft with the flavor of something
Once alive. We engage ink in chit chat.
We are meticulous, unpredictable, critical.
We discriminate lyric. Emphasize. Scrutinize.
We expose beauty in ugly noise.
Calloused pointer and thumb.
We promote early onset arthritis.
We swallow consonance, exhale
Assonance. Belch metaphorical
Memories. And we never sleep.

CONTRIBUTORS

Amanda Blythe is long, strong, and down to get the fiction on.

Grace Buchele is continually battling her desire for money with the realization that she doesn't want to be a productive member of society. In her spare time she enjoys facebook, lookbook, and iwastesomuchtime.com. She loves the taste of cinnamon gum, playing in the rain, and the custom made pizzas from Zacks.

Kristin Cichowski is a junior at good ol' UC. She is majoring in Theater with minors in Film Studies and Elementary Education. She would like to thank the Lantern staff for putting her stuff in here. Thanks to them, she's no longer one of those pathetic Facebook note writers. Well, maybe not. But still, she's very grateful! It means a lot to her.

Allison Cavanaugh exists.

Rosie Clark was most likely a bird in some previous life but right now she is a junior double majoring in English and Communications with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies.

Sarah Cogswell believes the world won't end in a whimper or a bang, but a discreet, tasteful announcement.

Kendal Conrad is a sophomore English major with a minor in Theatre. She has been published in the 2009 Creative Communication Anthology and has written two horror novels. Kendal is also a songwriter and received the Collective Works Honor in the 2010 Song of The Year contest. She performed her original song "If We Were A Nicholas Sparks Novel" at Nicholas Sparks' book signing in Philadelphia.

Madeline Constantino checks her phone, says goodbye to the girl beside her, and ducks out of class a little before four-fifteen on a Thursday to catch the ninety-three to Norristown and then the NHSL to sixty-ninth costing two dollars apiece in order to meet her sweetheart after work for dinner and drinks.

By day, **Kyle Davis** is a Bio major. By night, he is also a Bio major. By four AM, he is a procrastinator. On Friday evenings, he is simply a radio show co-host with a professional propensity for rambling. Nevertheless, he managed to fit this bio under the limit. Fantastic.

Chris Dickerson was born in Washington D.C. He hopped train cars until he was seventeen, at which time he taught himself to read and write (kind of). At eighteen, he pioneered the goatee. He hears it is now very popular. He then attended Ursinus College on an underwater basket weaving scholarship. He now resides on the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Sydney Dodson is a nineteen year old freshman at Ursinus College who plans on majoring in English. She found her passion for writing in a creative writing class which she took during her senior year of high school at the Hun School of Princeton.

Alexandra Duch is a freshman Biology major with a potential minor in Art. This lacrosse player can be found relaxing on the steps of Olin in her turfs daydreaming about that nap she was supposed to take twenty minutes ago.

Emily Dugan took her photo, titled "Mermaid Hair," while studying abroad in New Zealand. One weekend, during a walk along the beach with friends, she climbed to the top of a cliff that towered over the water. Looking down, Emily noticed a mermaid frolicking around in the waves.

Rikki Eble is a twenty-year-old Psychology major and Secondary Education/Religious Studies minor here at Ursinus College. She is involved in the Active Minds and Photography clubs on campus. She enjoys taking photos, making jewelry and candles, and collecting interesting mugs and tea cups.

Quinn Gilman-Forlini wishes the world were in black and white, for then she might see things clearly.

Brooke Haley was born May 27th 1991 to a nurse and an engineer

who still love her and support her creativity despite her lack of ability with numbers and fear of blood and sharp objects. She's lucky enough to have a sister who is her best friend, and some amazing non-biological friends that she can definitely see herself living with in a large refrigerator box later in life. Brooke also has a boyfriend who's giving her an extreme lack of sad things to write about. She might have to *gasp*, start writing about how happy she is.

James Harper is one of those born-again Christian freaks. Yep, Jesus is awesome! Like an all-you-can-eat buffet for your desperately starving soul.

Teleology consumes **Lindsay Hogan**.

Callie Ingram wants to live in Sri Lanka with the sloth bears.

Dominick Knowles is a freshman at Ursinus College who is, in the words of David Byrne, "afraid that Reason will triumph and that the world will become a place where anyone who doesn't fit that will become unnecessary."

Anna Larouche used SUBMIT CREEPY POEM. It's super effective!

Karen Levandoski majored in History and Philosophy, and although she still eagerly awaits her letter of acceptance to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardy, she must admit that life has been prettaay, prettaay, prettaay, pretty good without it. She wishes warmth, love, and sweet berry wine for her friends.

Anna Lorine is a junior Biology major and Creative Writing minor. She would like to remind the world of Benjamin Franklin's words, "Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing."

MJ McGinn: The former heavy weight world champion.

Connor McNamara is one bad cat.

Máire Moriarty is a senior Social Justice Studies major. She is so excited to again have the opportunity to be a part of her favorite UC literary magazine!

Kaitlin Murphy is an Environmental Studies major and the president of Sigma Sigma Sigma. She lives by the phrase 'alis volat propriis,' translated to 'she flies with her own wings.'

Brett Neslen is currently in his sophomore year and is majoring in English and History. He tries to write every day but is too often distracted by his cats.

Rayna Nunes' doctor says that she has a malformed public-duty gland and a natural deficiency in moral fibre, and is therefore excused from writing an actual biography.

Matthew O'Brien is a fifth year senior Philosophy major with the ability to read minds, disengage sports bras, and, most significantly, capture the imagination of his readers.

Liz Palovick: Artist, scientist, awesometist.

Rachel Perry did not write this.

Marissa Perilli is a Junior and an English major, with a Biology minor. Sometimes all she wants out of life is a job, an apartment, and a cat. Other times, she wants much more.

Jenny Phillips is a sophomore who is majoring in Art, Biology, and Pre-med. "Behind Reimert" was her first landscape painting done in oil paint. She started to actively paint and draw when she was in ninth grade and has been commissioned to do works at her hometown and Ursinus.

Monica Reuman is a silly lady in love with art, pasta, narwhals, faces, doors, Guanajuato, and the CdubbsBearCubs('15).

Ellyn Rolleston is an INFJ. She has been compared to Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Elizabeth Bennet.

Arielle Ross has slept in many places, including Sudanese deserts, felt yurts in Kazakh steps, Thai beaches and tiny economy class Delta Air Lines seats for eighteen hour flights. She has eaten some funky food, like sheep's brains, crickets fried with peanuts, and hedgehog ravioli. Next year, when she is living in a palace carefully constructed of plastic bins and duct tape, subsisting on ramen noodles and apples and peanut butter, she will miss Ursinus dearly.

Scott Sherman is a single shake man, far too busy for the follow up jiggle.

Sara Sherr is an English major who loves her sister Stef, chocolate ice cream, avocado, Rosie the Bunny and the euphoria of the moment in a basketball game when you realize you've stolen the ball. Her biggest literary influences are Jon Volkmer, Nzadi Keita, Robert Hass and Adrienne Rich.

Dixon Speaker is a junior English major, International Business and Management double minor at Ursinus. He also plays on the football team. He is an only child and had no pets growing up. Although this made his childhood difficult at times, he has come to embrace the solitude.

Kurt Stumpo inspired Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*.

Travis Quinn is experiencing episodes of involuntary knee tremors because he is nervous about the upcoming MCAT. Wish him luck to make his day.

Bethani Zeller is a senior International Relations major with minors in Art, International Business, and Politics. She has won several awards for her painting and photography work through the Berman Museum of Art, including a piece purchased and permanently displayed in the Myrin Collection.

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